María López Belloso /
Sara Clavero / Sofia Strid (eds.)

Resisting the pandemic. Better stories and innovation in times of crisis

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In an era marked by profound disparities, this book explores the significant ways the pandemic has deepened gender inequalities in the labor, education, and health sectors. Through a rigorous analysis within the RESISTIRÉ EU funded project framework, it highlights innovative scientific and social methodologies that have emerged to challenge these inequalities. Structured into nine chapters, the work synthesizes insights gained from extensive evaluations of public policies and grassroots initiatives across Europe, offering 'better stories' and practices that encapsulate transformative potentials in crisis response.

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Contents

Tables

Figures

María Lopéz Belloso, Sofia Strid and Sara Clavero

Better stories and innovations as resistances to inequalities in crisis: Introduction to the book

In March 2020, the world was shocked by a global pandemic (WHO, 2020) that challenged not only global health authorities, but also other international institutions and authorities at a global scale (Žižek, 2020; Ullah & Ferdous, 2022). Beyond the health (Heymann & Shindo, 2020) and logistical challenges (Amankwah-Amoah, 2020; Choi, 2021) we faced, the pandemic posed an unprecedented challenge to the research community across the academic, industry and government sectors. From the moment the global pandemic was declared, the research community, especially in the medical and health fields, was dedicated to analysing the challenge (Pollard et al., 2020; Hafeez et al., 2020) and searching for solutions and elements to mitigate the impact of the disease, with the search for a vaccine being the most significant effort (Kaur & Gupta, 2020; Haynes et al., 2020; Haque & Pant, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Yet, the measures to contain the pandemic also highlighted the challenges that this situation entailed in economic (Brodeur et al., 2021; Pinzaru et al., 2020), social (Ward, 2020; Clemente Suarez et al., 2020; Pedrosa et al., 2020) and cultural terms (Nhamo et al., 2020). Thus, from the first moments of the crisis, research efforts were also invested in identifying and analysing the scope of those economic, social and cultural impacts. All this took place in a hostile context, as measures restricting mobility and social contact led to the paralysis of many activities, remote working and a lack of access to traditional means of research.

Global, European and national authorities initiated programmes to fund and promote scientific activity to improve the management of the crisis since the declaration of the pandemic. These programmes were dominated by the medical and pharmaceutical sectors, with some residual or limited initiatives aimed at analysing the pandemic's social and economic impacts. In this context, a group of organisations and researchers alerted of the gender and sex-differentiated impacts of the pandemic, which were quite evident since the beginning of the crisis, although few entities prioritised analyses from this point of view.[1] The

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1   https://www.genderandcovid-19.org/about-us/ last accessed 19 March 2024

difficulties emerging from this lack of political and economic prioritisation were compounded not only by the aforementioned unfavourable environment resulting from mobility restrictions and the closure of facilities, but also by the need to carry out research and analysis at a dizzying speed, which is unusual in the social sciences. And so it was that, not without difficulty, the RESISTIRÉ project (RESpondIng to outbreaks through co-creaTIve sustainable inclusive equality stRatEgies) was launched, funded by the European Commission under its Horizon 2020 programme.

State responses to the COVID-19 health crisis resulted in significant disruptions or halts to essential societal support systems. These responses triggered shifts in social structures and organisation, with gender playing a significant role in its effects (Strid et al., 2022). While some individuals benefited from a transition to a more online existence, e.g., through telework or online shopping, others experienced job losses, heightened levels of violence, financial hardships, and physical and mental health challenges. Since the outbreak of the crisis, feminist analyses pointed to the deep-rooted structural causes of these disparities, calling for the need of urgent transformative actions to address them. The pandemic exposed and exacerbated pre-existing gender inequalities across various facets of life, including the labour market, educational opportunities, and health and social protection systems (Axelsson et al., 2021). Distinct gendered impacts were particularly evident in the areas of employment, domestic responsibilities, caregiving, and mental health (Sandström et al., 2022, 2023; Stovell et al., 2021, 2022). Women, as a collective, disproportionately shouldered a greater burden resulting from political responses compared to men. However, looking at the inequality impacts of the pandemic responses through a gender+ intersectional lens (Verloo, 2006, 2007, 2013) could illuminate the ways in which this gender-based inequality could be further exacerbated by intersecting factors such as socioeconomic class, age, migration status, and other dimensions of inequality, with these additional layers of disadvantage intensifying the challenges faced by women (Axelsson et al., 2021; Sandström et al., 2022, 2023). Thus, socioeconomic class can influence access to resources and opportunities, potentially limiting women's ability to navigate political landscapes effectively. Age can also play a significant role, with younger and older women potentially facing unique barriers in engaging with political processes. Additionally, the migration status of women can compound their vulnerability, as they may encounter legal and social obstacles that further restrict their political agency. Therefore, it was hypothesised that the gender disparity in the impact of political responses would not be uniform, but deeply intertwined with these multiple facets of inequality, creating a complex matrix of challenges for women.

RESISTIRÉ was an EU funded thirty-month research project that aimed at finding sustainable solutions to these gendered inequalities and to strengthen societal resilience to outbreaks. The project brought numerous innovations to the analysis of the pandemic, and of crises more generally. From the methodological point of view, a mixed methods approach was able to provide a large volume of information on the impact of the pandemic. It made major contributions to the state of the art by incorporating a gender+ intersectional approach into the analysis of public policies, quantitative and qualitative data analyses, and social innovation. Gender and intersectional approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic were relevant for policy analysis and social innovation because they highlighted the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on different groups within society. By understanding the unique challenges faced by various populations based on their gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other intersecting identities, policy-makers and innovators could develop more effective and equitable responses.

Structured in nine chapters, this book synthesises the methodological, scientific, and social innovations made in RESISTIRÉ, and extracts the best practices, or 'better stories' – in the terminology used by the project – based on the concept coined by Dina Georgis (Georgis, 2013). The nine chapters of the book address the main contributions made, including Open Studios (12 in total), pilot projects (seven in total), as well as key insights drawn from the analysis of 329 public policies, 326 Civil Society Organisations (CSO) initiatives, 793 individual narratives and the analysis of 316 Rapid Assessment Surveys (RAS) in 30 countries (EU27, minus Malta (hereinafter EU26), and Iceland, Serbia, Türkiye, and the UK).

The first chapter, *Navigating crisis through innovation: A multifaceted journey*, by María López Belloso, Alain Denis and Sofia Strid, introduces the project with a focus on its innovative design. The methodology is described as well as the links between the different project activities, such as the use of mappings; research on qualitative indications and quantitative indicators of inequalities; the co-creation with stakeholders; the solution orientation, including the prototyping and testing of social innovation; and the embedding of advocacy to generate impact on policy and stakeholders. The chapter highlights the main innovations, including the speed of execution with activities running in parallel and working in three short (sex-eight month) cycles to produce results fast; the solution orientation (as opposed to problem-analysis) of the Open Studios to co-create solutions as a central element in each cycle; the use of 'better stories' and personas; the use of design thinking and design techniques to translate research results into operational solutions; and the linking of research and activism at all stages of the project, including for advocacy activities.

The second chapter, *Research during and about crisis for innovations to address inequalities*, by Sofia Strid and Alain Denis, describes and discusses a multi-disciplinary and novel research and innovation project methodology based on co-creative and innovation driven design-thinking, deployed to generate robust, rapid, and inclusive evidence-based innovations to complex problems. Repeated in three step-by-step cycles with in-built feedback loops, this methodology combines mixed-methods research of the impacts of policies, and the translation of research results into insights in order to co-create operational tools, disseminate knowledge, develop policy recommendations and empower stakeholders and end-users to exploit project results. This methodological approach was tested in RESISTIRÉ, and while it yielded many promising results and solutions, issues related to the robustness of data and sustainable working-processes emerged. Both promises and pitfalls are discussed further in the chapter, which ends with recommendations for future research.

The third chapter, *Open Studios as a methodology: Exploring challenges and opportunities in design thinking for collaborative feminist research*, by Anne-Charlott Callerstig, Alain Denis, Aart Kerremans and Charikleia Tzanakou, engages with the increasing interest in collaborative research methods. It discusses the results of applying a collaborative methodology to facilitate a process of reflexivity and co-creation among multiple stakeholders. The Open Studios, twelve in total, were designed with the principles of design-thinking, involving human-centeredness, co-creation, empathetic involvement, visualisation, iteration, and experimentation. Critiques of the concept include the argument that it risks privileging designers' ideas; that it may reinforce conservative/non-transformative solutions due to the lack of time and reflexivity; the strong focus on finding quick solutions; and the resource-intensive nature of the approach. In this chapter, the authors explore how to overcome these challenges by integrating a gender+ intersectional perspective.

The fourth chapter, *Prototyping and testing social innovations to reduce gender+ inequalities: Lessons learned from the nine pilot projects implemented through RESISTIRÉ*, by Alain Denis, Claudia Aglietti, and Elena Ghidoni, analyses the social innovations co-created in RESISTIRÉ to reduce gender+ inequalities in specific areas and implemented by civil society organisations. Through action-oriented analysis and co-creation methods, the knowledge generated in the research step of the project was used to identify a list of ideas for solutions to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on intersectional vulnerabilities. Seven of these ideas were selected for further development and testing in pilot projects. As RESISTIRÉ addressed different areas, the portfolio of pilots was diverse, ranging from solutions more focused on improving care to others aimed

at empowering youth to address and prevent gender-based violence. The pilots were also designed to involve civil society organisations as implementers, as they have shown great capacity to develop rapid and innovative bottom-up responses to the unmet needs of vulnerable groups during the pandemic. This chapter analyses the potential of the seven piloted social innovations, presenting the different ways in which they were implemented, depending on the context and area, and the barriers and enablers observed in the process. The lessons learnt provide insights into how successful initiatives can be scaled up and seeded. Although there are challenges in replicating and scaling up experiences, almost all projects have achieved sustainability, even with low initial funding, and will continue to have a lasting impact.

The fifth chapter, *The 'why' and the 'how' of using narratives in intersectional research – the experience of RESISTIRÉ*, by Caitriona Delaney, Lina Sandström, Ainhoa Izaguirre Choperena, Anne-Charlott Callerstig, Usue Beloki Marañon, Marina Cacace, and Claudia Aglietti, engages with narrative methodology as a way of analysing the impact of the pandemic and its state responses on gender+ inequalities by giving voice to marginalised groups. This chapter analyses how narrative interviews were used to amplify marginal voices and, importantly, to do so in the individual's own 'voice'. Specifically, the 'why' and the 'how' of using narratives; the theoretical approach congruent with choosing narrative interviews to allow for the effects of both the meso and macro levels on individual behavioural, social and economic inequalities to be garnered, and how narratives may be used in the policy sphere and within academia are discussed. The chapter concludes with ways forward and lessons learned during RESISTIRÉ regarding narrative interviewing.

The sixth chapter, *Methodological innovations and potential for intersectionality within Rapid Assessment Surveys (RAS) and collaborations,* by Charikleia Tzanakou, Audrey Harroche, Alexis Still, and Maria Silvestre focuses on the meta-analysis conducted on Rapid Assessment Surveys (RAS) initiated by lobby groups, scientists, and official agencies to provide quick, research-based assessments. From May 2021 to December 2022, 30 national researchers mapped 316 RAS in EU26 countries, Iceland, Serbia, Türkiye, and the UK. The main objective was to identify and analyse national-level RAS that offered evidence on the economic, social, and environmental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic from a gender+ perspective. The RAS analysis revealed a significant gap in understanding the full impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups in Europe, including young people, senior citizens, single parents, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and LGBTQ+ communities. Of particular concern is the lack of gender+ research on these groups. Intersectional analysis was limited due to the scarcity

of responses from these hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups when RAS captured data on various inequality grounds. Furthermore, substantial data gaps were identified, especially in relation to race, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity. In summary, this meta-analysis sheds light on pandemic research and highlights the gaps that need to be addressed. This chapter plays a crucial role in establishing the groundwork for advancing research capacity in intersectional analysis.

The seventh chapter, *Doing social research with a network of national researchers: the experience of RESISTIRÉ*, by Claudia Aglietti, Marina Cacace, and Federico Marta, delves into the challenges and opportunities inherent in doing social research with international collaborative research teams, with a particular focus on comparative research and situations in which the team is geographically dispersed. The complex architecture of the research team of the RESISTIRÉ project provides a relevant example, as it involved a network of national researchers covering thirty European countries, engaged in a comprehensive research process that included the standardised collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative primary and secondary data. Contributing to the burgeoning literature on the Science of Team Science, which is still relatively under-researched in the social sciences, this chapter addresses the complexity of collaborative research processes in this area. Approaches and tools used to manage the research process, making the most of the team's diversity, are presented, along with their challenges and limitations, and related suggestions for improving the collaborative experience are formulated.

The eighth chapter, *Assessing the gender+ perspective in the COVID-19 recovery and resilience plans*, by Elena Ghidoni, María López and Dolores Morondo engages with how the COVID-19 outbreak led policy-makers across the world to an unprecedented effort in policy responses to address the health crisis and its socio-economic impacts. The analysis of the quality of these policy responses and their impact on pre-existing gender+ inequalities has been at the core of the RESISTIRÉ research endeavour. In the post-pandemic phase, the regulation establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility set gender equality as a cross-cutting priority for the EU member states' recovery plans. This brought the opportunity to compare how different countries translate gender related issues into their policy agenda. Drawing on a gender+ approach, these plans were analysed in term of both content and process, as well as the reactions from civil society organisations to the measures. The chapter builds on this analysis and provides a reflection on how the National Recovery and Resilience Plans address gender+ issues in different policy domains (gender-based violence; work and labour market; economy; gender pay and pension gaps; gender care gap;

decision-making and politics; environmental justice; health; education), what kind of policy solutions are presented as ways to forward gender equality, and where gender-sensitive measures are still missing among various policy areas.

Finally, the ninth chapter, *'Better stories' of feminist+ witnessing of co-creativity in dark times. Epilogue*, by Ayşe Gül Altınay and Sofia Strid, engages with how feminist scholar Dina Georgis' concept of the 'better story' was used in REISTIRÉ to make visible inspiring examples of inclusive policies and civic response to the pandemic, with the aim of empowering the creators of such actions and of inspiring others to take creative and effective action in the face of ongoing crises, including the pandemic. Dina Georgis (2013) invites us to explore the 'better story' of each moment, each context, with the understanding that 'there is always a better story than the better story'. In the context of RESISTIRÉ, this has entailed an invitation to identify, highlight and learn from the better stories of policy and civic responses to the pandemic, as well as an invitation to imagine even better stories of response and transformation with regard to social inequalities. This chapter, which takes the form of an epilogue, provides a self-reflective analysis of working with gender+ 'better stories' as a methodology that values, encourages and makes visible creativity and collective wisdom emerging from different contexts. It also explores the (transformative) significance of such a methodology, especially when it incorporates a gender+ intersectional lens, for democratising knowledge production towards greater inclusion, participation, social engagement and solution development.

Taken together, the nine chapters in this volume contribute to ongoing academic discussions, research and innovation on crisis management, inequality, and social justice. We are convinced that they will prove to be an essential reference material for understanding the social impacts of crises and an important source of knowledge and 'know-how' for policy-makers, civil society organisations and social scientists. With a focus oriented towards innovative methodologies for political and social actors, policy-makers at various levels of government will gain a deeper understanding of social innovation tools and their uses in developing targeted and effective responses in future crises. Our ambition is that the book will help inform policy decisions related to healthcare, employment, social welfare, and gender equality with an intersectionality lens. Civil society organisations working on gender equality, women's rights, and social justice issues will find the book relevant to their advocacy efforts and program planning, as it will offer evidence and insights to support their work in addressing the impact of current and future crises on marginalised communities.

However, this orientation towards methodologies, knowledge transfer and social impact does not curtail the scientific impact of this publication, which

will undoubtedly become reference material for the social sciences, especially for the fields of political science, sociology and scientific innovation, as well as gender studies. In addition, teaching staff and students in universities and colleges studying gender studies, public health, sociology, and related disciplines could use the book as a supplementary resource for their courses, as it provides valuable case studies and research findings for classroom discussions and research projects.

Given the importance and impact of the RESISTIRÉ project, this book is an effort to synthesise its innovative contribution. It represents not only the culmination of the dedication and collaboration of all involved, but will also serve as a vital resource for academics, policy-makers and practitioners seeking to navigate the complex intersection of crisis, democracy and resilience.

The RESISTIRÉ project stands as an example of how collaborative research can transcend expectations. Its legacy is a testament to the power of democratic values and the potential for resilience in the face of adversity. As we move forward, the lessons learnt from this project will continue to shape our understanding of crisis response and democracy, offering hope and guidance in even the most challenging of times.

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María López Belloso, Alain Denis and Sofia Strid

Navigating crisis through innovation: A multifaceted journey

Introduction

When the global pandemic was declared in 2020, the scientific community focused on analysing the origin of the disease and its possible cures from an eminently medical and public health approach. As the pandemic evolved and the political and social consequences of the measures adopted to curb the contagion were prolonged over time, its social, behavioural and cultural impacts became more evident. The starting point for the development of this research project was the call published by the European Commission (EC) on 19 May 2020 'call for an Expression of Interest for innovative and rapid health-related approaches to respond to COVID-19 and to deliver quick results for society for a higher level of preparedness of health systems'.[1] One of the topics of the call was addressing the socio-economic impacts of the outbreak response. Below is a citation of the topic descriptions, more specifically part of the description of the scope:

> Proposals should focus on lessons learnt: they should (i) address how to mitigate social and economic impacts of the outbreak response related to health systems; (ii) identify non-intended consequences of epidemic-control decisions; and (iii) provide answers to social, including gendered, dynamics of the outbreak and the related public health response.[2]

In this context, the decision to focus on these impacts from a feminist perspective was indeed a political decision. Aware that 'the personal is political' (Hanisch, 1969) and that emotions play a central role in research processes (Barbalet, 2002), a group of feminist researchers decided to point out the relevance of the gender impact of the pandemic. This decision undoubtedly connects with the foundations of feminist epistemology, which emphasises the need for situated and decentralised knowledge (Smith, 1987; Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 1987;

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1 https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/events/upcoming-events/2nd-special-call-expression-interest-respond-coronavirus-information-session-2020-05-20_en last accessed 19 March 2024

2 https://cordis.europa.eu/programme/id/H2020_SC1-PHE-CORONAVIRUS-2020-2C/en last accessed 19 March 2024

Silvestre et al., 2020), but it also responded to the responsibility assumed by this driving force to research and document the impact that both the pandemic and the political decisions taken to manage it had on women and gendered groups. This decision reflects the importance of highlighting feminist argumentation in the construction of consent by incorporating visions that incorporate bodies, culture and emotion (Holland, 2007).

Therefore, this chapter, synthesises the contributions, innovations and achievements of the research conducted by a consortium of ten multidisciplinary research, innovation and design partners from nine European countries, as well as a network of thirty-eight national experts covering the selected thirty countries. The aim of the project was threefold: (1) to provide evidence and empower policy-makers and other stakeholders to anticipate potential negative impacts and mitigate current negative impacts on inequalities when taking decisions linked to public health and outbreaks, (2) to understand the impact of the COVID-19 policy responses on behavioural, social and economic inequalities, based on a conceptual gender+ framework to identify, measure and collect evidence on inequalities; and (3) to design/devise and pilot solutions/social innovations which can be applied by policy-makers, stakeholders and actors in the field of different policy domains of the key objectives of the European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy 2020–25 (EC, 2020a).

The chapter introduces an innovative project characterised by its design and multifaceted methodology. The project's key components are outlined, emphasising the interconnectedness of its various activities:

1. Comprehensive methodology: The chapter provides an overview of the project's methodology, which encompassed mapping exercises, qualitative assessments, and quantitative analysis of inequalities.
2. Stakeholder engagement: A significant aspect of the project involved active collaboration with stakeholders, fostering co-creation to address challenges collectively.
3. Solution-oriented approach: Rather than focusing solely on problem analysis, the project emphasised a solution-oriented perspective. It incorporated prototyping and testing of social innovations as integral elements in each phase.
4. Advocacy integration: The project's strategy also included embedding advocacy efforts, ensuring that research findings had a tangible impact on policies and stakeholders throughout the project's lifecycle.

We highlight the four key innovations of the RESISTIRÉ project: The agile approach, which allowed for concurrent activities and shorter cycles (six-eight

months), facilitating rapid results production and therefore efficiency; methodological innovations, where collaborative solutions were co-created in Open Studios, promoting a dynamic and inclusive approach; the leverage of design thinking and techniques to translate research outcomes into practical, operational solutions; and the contribution of the project for a research-activism synergy, bridging, at every stage, the gap between research and activism, aligning advocacy efforts with research findings for a more significant impact.

In sum, the chapter sets the stage for a detailed exploration of the project's innovative features and its potential to drive positive change through an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach.

Project inception and pandemic realities

As we have noted, the declaration of a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in March 2020 was the beginning of a crisis that put the scientific community at a crossroads. The measures taken to curb the disease, including containment, social distancing and facility closures, made it extremely difficult for the scientific community to perform its activities. On the other hand, the need to respond to the crisis generated by the pandemic meant that an unprecedented amount of money was spent on scientific research. Indeed, the World Bank's 2019 report, in response to the first signs of the disease, prioritised the need to invest in science and innovation (GPMB, 2019), although funding for medical research had started to pick up between 2016 and 2017 with a 7% increase, and domestic public sector funding in low- and middle-income countries had grown by 17% (GPMB, 2019, p. 28). The US has traditionally led the way in research funding, especially since the early 20th century (CRS, 2022), and as Borahan's (2022) study points out, Europe has failed to match US funding or that of other players such as Korea or China. However, with the outbreak of the pandemic, Europe made an unprecedented effort to increase funding. Thus, the Commission launched several special actions for coronavirus research under Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe, as part of a €1 billion commitment for coronavirus research (EC, 2020). More specifically, this action took the form of two emergency calls, one on 30 January 2020, and the other on 19 May 2020, channelling €48.2 million to eighteen research projects and €128 million to twenty-four research projects respectively.

Projects funded under the first call covered the improvement of epidemiology and public health, including outbreak preparedness and response. More specifically, projects were funded to improve rapid diagnostic tests, the development of new treatments, and the development of new vaccines (EC, 2020b). The second

call gave researchers just under four weeks to prepare collaborative research projects. The research community mobilised quickly. Research proposals were quickly evaluated by independent experts on the basis of their scientific excellence and high potential impact. A very detailed analysis of the EU funding for COVID-19 was performed by Emanuel Castellarin (2020). According to Castellarin, the European Union prioritised global financing initiatives in the areas of public health and research, aligned with its values and the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, expenditures on public health, humanitarian aid, and research at both internal and external levels were comparable, showcasing the EU's commitment to a cohesive global response. In contrast, the global economic and social response to the crisis showed limited international cooperation, with the G20 playing an informal coordination role. While financial contributions were announced, the G20's emphasis on existing measures and a 'business as usual' approach raised questions about the potential for future developments (Castellarin, 2020). Member States also launched numerous initiatives to promote research. Spain, for example, earmarked €30 million for bio-health research projects under COVID-19. Of this amount, almost 80% (24 million) went to the so-called COVID Fund managed by the Instituto de Salud Carlos III (ISCIII) (Bankinter, 2020), hence, to research with a clear medical orientation. This tendency to focus efforts on health is echoed in most national funds, as reported in the OECD report on measuring governments' response to COVID-19 in R&D funding (2023).

The starting point for the development of the research proposal was the aforementioned second emergency call, which included a topic addressing the socio-economic impacts of the outbreak response[1]. According to the European Commission's own data, in the second emergency call, five projects were funded that responded to the same topic: COVINFORM, PERISCOPE, SHARE COVID 19, RESPOND and RESISTIRÉ, allocating a total of 33.2 million euros (EC, no date). The topic emphasised the focus on lessons learnt, especially addressing the mitigation of social and economic impacts of the outbreak response related to health systems; identifying non-intended consequences of epidemic-control decisions; and providing answers to its social implications, 'including gendered dynamics of the outbreak and the related public health response'. This reference to gender dynamics provided a window of opportunity for a group of feminist scholars to develop a proposal that would incorporate the gender dimension and intersectionality into this challenge, incorporating not only sensitivity and emotions but also the responsibility to incorporate the vision and experiences of groups on the margins, while noting that women were at the forefront of the response to the pandemic (OECD, 2020). Even though women did much of the

care work and constituted the majority of the workforce in the sectors considered 'essential' during the pandemic, analyses from a gender perspective were not incorporated in the outbreak of the crisis, neither in medical research nor in research from a sociological perspective[3]. It was precisely the lobbying and work of groups like the RESISTIRÉ consortium and other activist research groups such as 'Gender & COVID'[4] that succeeded in incorporating this perspective into research. For this reason, assertiveness and research activism constituted essential elements of the design of the research itself, as we will develop below.

Despite the activism, this challenge was not easy. The first difficulty was time, both for the development of the proposal and for results delivery. Only slightly more than three weeks were allowed for the submission of the proposal. This period, considering the added difficulties related to confinements and mobility restrictions, was very limited to build a competitive proposal. The team overcame this not only by relying on a strong network of researchers and innovators with similar interests and previous experience of working together, but also on a very high level of trust. This trust and sisterhood were, as we will see later, one of the cornerstones of RESISTIRÉ's success. With this short deadline, writing the proposal had to be done in the 'free time' remaining on top of other professional commitments. For those who took up the challenge, this meant working long days and seven days a week. The proposal development will not be covered here, but it was done in four main steps: developing a concept note; approaching partners and getting commitments; collecting reactions on the concept and fine-tuning of the research design; and drafting the proposal. It needs to be noted also that for many women researchers, the lockdown meant also taking over (additional) care duties and home responsibilities, meaning extra burden and significant work life balance challenges.

These decisions in terms of project composition and scope were not without risk: the assurance and advantages provided by the cohesion and reliability of the core-group limited the consortium in terms of geographical composition and areas of expertise. Therefore, a second decision taken was to go for a wide coverage of countries, the twenty-seven EU Member States and a selection of Associated Countries. To be able to have this reach, an existing network of national

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3   Journals such as *The Lancet* or European-funded projects such as Going FWD pointed to the need for detailed research into the sex/gender variables of the pandemic (Wenham et al., 2020).

4   The project website summarises project's goals: https://www.genderandcovid-19.org/ last accessed 18 March 2024.

researchers that the consortium partners had worked with in the past decade for a number of gender-related research projects would be involved. This choice helped to increase the geographical coverage, but generated management and coordination difficulties. The team's trust and the prioritisation of generating quality and innovative results took precedence over other interests. A shared leadership in a system of horizontal collaboration was imposed, sharing tasks and responsibilities, which generated unconventional management structures in competitive projects of this size.

The second challenge in terms of time was to ensure the consortium's capacity to deliver results in the short term, as the call itself and the urgency of the situation required. The pandemic was in full swing, and producing evidence and results after its end would have no impact. This meant generating a methodology and a way of working that took the researchers out of their comfort zone, both in terms of speed and focus. A three-cycle methodology was developed in which, through the overlapping of activities, a large volume of data was generated providing significant and relevant information. Yet this also meant a huge effort for the team, which was predominantly used to social science methodologies that allocate much more time to the discussion, reflection and analysis of the results. It could be said that the methodological design of RESISTIRÉ tried to cover all the layers of the 'methodological onion' in a very short time (Saunders et al., 2009, pp. 106–109). In addition, the aforementioned collaboration and horizontality implied shared responsibilities among the team in different tasks, which resulted in combining tasks and responsibilities simultaneously, generated a very heavy workload but also a great solidarity among team members.

Another significant challenge was to justify the target group and focus of the project. As mentioned above, the gender-differentiated impact was evident from the beginning, yet not many other projects addressed the pandemic through a gender lens, and even less so by incorporating intersectionality.

RESISTIRÉ thus became one of the benchmark projects among gender initiatives to analyse the impacts of the pandemic. Other initiatives were launched, such as the COVID-19 Gender and Development Initiative, a project of the Center for Global Development, which aimed to promote gender equality and long-term prosperity in low- and middle-income countries by informing global and national decision makers' policy responses to the current pandemic and future crises (Gender & Covid Initiative). There were also initiatives along these lines at national level, such as DATA COVID GENDER funded by the Catalan Agency for Health Quality Assessment in Spain, or the set of projects funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology in Portugal. The Gender and COVID-19 Project is worth highlighting. This initiative also emerged bottom-up

by small group of academics from public health, international relations, public policy, and development economics who saw the need to better understand and address the gendered effects of COVID-19 and government responses to the outbreak. Their initiative received the funding from the Canadian Institute of Health Research (CIHR) to conduct an ad hoc study of the gendered effects of COVID-19 in Canada, the UK, China, and Hong Kong and their research resulted in highly influential paper published in The Lancet.

The European Commission set up an Expert Group in 2021 to specifically analyse the impact of COVID 19 on gender equality in research and innovation. The Expert Group analysed institutional responses of COVID-19 and demonstrated that these were rarely taking up gender aspects. Many recommendations to different stakeholders were presented. Its report highlighted that women academics and individuals with care responsibilities, carried most of the additional workload and care responsibilities at home. Consequently, they experienced a decrease in their academic productivity and an unfavourable work-life balance for academic women, at the cost of their mental health and well-being (EC, 2023).

Often, these initiatives remain academic discussions or analyses that hardly permeate political discourse and the general population. For this reason, at the time of drafting the proposal, the RESISTIRÉ team made a clear commitment to analyse the responses to the pandemic coming from political actors and civil society, not only with the aim of making good practices and replicable initiatives visible, but also to be able to contrast the coherence of political responses to the crisis with the mainstreaming of gender in public policies in Europe. While there is no denying that inequalities persist in Europe, policy actors boast of policy and regulatory progress on equality in recent decades. It was important for the project team to understand how different policy responses were having unequal and unequalising effects, but also how different responses could be put into place to understand and address gender and intersectional inequalities in different policy domains (Lombardo & Kantola, 2019). The clearest example is the European Strategy for Gender Equality (2020–2025) (EC, 2020a), which summarises the achievements and objectives of the European Commission in the aforementioned period. As the EC Strategy, RESISTIRÉ pursued a dual approach of gender mainstreaming combined with targeted actions, and intersectionality was a horizontal principle for its implementation.

Unveiling our methodology and collaborative approach

As discussed above, in order to meet the challenges of responding to the expected scope of the call, a number of methodological decisions were made that impacted on the research design. These decisions were underpinned, above all, by feminist epistemology and collaboration, and would not have been possible if all those involved in the design and research had not shared an understanding and commitment to these approaches. As argued by Silvestre and colleagues (2020), the impact of feminist theory has sent ripples through the realm of social sciences with an influence that extends beyond the mere acknowledgement of previously overlooked dimensions (Swingewood, 2000, p. 241). It also serves as a potent catalyst for questioning the implicit male bias entrenched within the theoretical and methodological frameworks upon which these sciences have been built, as highlighted by Molina (2000, p. 255).

In the late eighties, Harding was careful to distinguish between method as 'techniques for gathering evidence' and methodology as 'a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed' (Harding, 1987a, p. 2f) and this distinction explains the decisions made by the RESISTIRÉ team, both in terms of the tools and techniques to be used for the research, as well as in the design of the research process itself.

As Doucet and Mouthner (2006, p. 40) point out, feminist epistemology stresses the need to do research not only 'about women' but also 'for' and 'with' women and in RESISTIRÉ there was a clear commitment to research that focused on the impact of the pandemic on women, especially analysing intersectionality, and with women, facilitating the participation of different actors (experts, members of civil society organisations, artists and people from the most affected groups, etc.) in the different activities. Secondly, these authors point to the engagement of feminist methodologies with innovation, through challenging conventional or mainstream ways of collecting, analysing, and presenting data. This was also a clear commitment of RESISTIRÉ researchers as explained above.

In addition to these two characteristics already consolidated in the literature, Doucet and Mouthner (2006) add two elements typical of feminist methodologies that have been key in the methodological design of RESISTIRÉ: knowing and representing 'others', and reflexivity. Knowing the realities and giving a voice to vulnerable groups is at the heart of the RESISTIRÉ approach. To this end, different approaches were combined: the analysis of public policies, the analysis of quantitative results and the qualitative collection of the different narratives of the pandemic. This approach has had an impact on the reflexivity that characterises feminist and sociological research, as the nature of the call required rapid

responses. However, this does not mean that the reflexive dimension was not present, but that it was done in other ways, such as Open Studios, seminars, or co-creation.

Furthermore, the research carried out by RESISTIRÉ has another very relevant characteristic: the social responsibility to seek and identify innovative solutions. Beyond learning about the realities of the most vulnerable people, giving them a voice and reflecting on the findings, the team took on the challenge of being able to test or pilot innovative solutions that would respond to the negative impacts detected. This was done via the co-creation and launch of pilot actions, for which civil society actors and other stakeholders could apply for funding from RESISTIRÉ to implement. In addition, the research design incorporated an element of activism and advocacy to generate impact on policy and stakeholders during the project.

Bearing in mind that the 'knowledge' generated was situated in a context in which the team itself was affected by the pandemic, and experiencing the difficulties of confinement, mobility restrictions, and the overload of work and care tasks, the results obtained are also mediated by this circumstance. The methodology, as well as the links between the different activities, is described in Chapter 2 in this volume.

Breaking ground: The innovative elements of our methodology

In this section we highlight different aspects of the project's design that contribute to making the project an innovative research project.

The speed of the project's execution was atypical, and therefore an innovation. As explained above, this was triggered by the context of the pandemic and the ambition of the team to produce results fast to feed policy-makers. Apart from working fast and in short cycles (six to eight months), this was only possible by running different activities in parallel, rather than consecutively, as would be the common practice (e.g., quantitative analysis before qualitative analysis). Another technique used was to involve team members in charge of solution development also in the research and in the analysis of the research results. This allowed for a faster transfer (no need for deliverables to be ready) and overlaps in terms of timing. This is obviously not an ideal situation from a scientific research point of view but was the only way to effectively have a first set of RESISTIRÉ factsheets with policy recommendations ready for advocacy six months after the start of the project.

The solution orientation is also innovative. As with the speed of execution, this was triggered by the ambition to reduce the impacts on inequalities and serve the needs of those being discriminated against. There was a sense of urgency in the team due to the context, but the solution orientation is healthy for all research that has a potential to lead to concrete and implementable innovations as well as to contribute to better policies. The Open Studios (Boyer et al., 2011; Denis & Strid, 2024; Strid & Denis, 2024) played an important role in this respect. The whole Open Studio concept was meant to counterbalance the analytical 'understanding of the problem' by switching the minds to the holistic 'let's find a solution' approach. It functioned as an intervention to break the research silos and create synergies between the results of the different research methods and themes. Different techniques were used in this respect, including the 'better stories' (Georgis, 2013; Strid et al., 2022c) (see below).

Design thinking, as an approach and a process, was at the origin of the overall project design as well as of the Open Studios (Razzouk & Shute, 2012). The combination of cycles of divergence with cycles of convergence, the so-called 'double-diamond' of design, was embedded in the two days of the Open Studios (Design Council, 2024). Techniques used in product and service design were used in the Open Studios, which included not only brainstorming techniques but also personas. The use of personas was considered as an effective way to translate some of the insights from qualitative research (the narratives) into the creative cycle (Denis & Strid, 2024), but they did serve other purposes such as stimulate creativity and ensure an orientation towards the people for which we were trying to find solutions for the vulnerable and those being discriminated against. Using techniques like the personas opened the minds of many of the RESISTIRÉ researchers, as well as for external participants in the Open Studios. This will also open perspectives for the use of such techniques in their future research and activities (see e.g., Kerremans et al., 2023a, 2023b; see Chapter 3).

Typical to a design approach is to bring inspiration into a creative workshop (Foster, 2021). For Open Studios, the original idea was to bring in inspiring examples of policies and civil society initiatives that had been developed in reaction to the policies of the pandemic and their impact on inequalities. These inspiring practices were selected from the mappings of such bottom-up initiatives performed as part of the research activities. When finalising the preparation of the first Open Studio, it was decided to position these inspiring practices as 'better stories'. This concept, as originally developed by Dina Georgis (2013), fitted perfectly in the solution orientation as it was not only inspirational but could also be looked at as a better story of collaborative and co-creative research

and innovation and participants could work on finding ways to make them even better (Kerremans et al., 2023a; see Chapter 9).

Combining (internal) project team members with invited (external) participants helped to open the minds and new perspectives which indeed led to numerous ideas for potential solutions. The diversity of the invited participants was a key element to the success of the Open Studios. The systematic inclusion of at least one participant with a creative industries background was also innovative. This helped to think outside of the box. The experience also proved that it is possible to find such creative profiles that do have a strong link and/or affinity with the theme of the Open Studio. Examples were an artist painter who participated in the Open Studio on old persons, who had started a project to destigmatise old age through the painting of portraits of older people (Golden age) during the pandemic, or an artist who was also involved in a community garden, for an Open Studio on green spaces.

One of the outputs of the Open Studios was ideas of social innovations: potential approaches to meet the needs of specific (vulnerable) groups that were not covered either by the public sector or the market (Kerremans et al., 2023). Seven out of the many ideas generated were prototyped and tested as part of the project (see Chapter 4). Prototyping and testing are standard activities of a design process and integrated in RESISTIRÉ to translate research results into potential solutions. This can be considered as innovative for a research project as it creates a direct link between research and practice. The project also acted as a funder of innovation, as the ideas produced were translated into concrete projects; calls for applicants were set up and civil society organisations applied for funding from RESISTIRÉ to concretise and test the idea in real life. Therefore, a part of the grant from the EC was used to fund these pilot projects that tested the prototype of new services targeting specific target groups.

Research projects are expected to disseminate their results. In the case of RESISTIRÉ, the choice was made to also include activities labelled as 'advocacy'. Research results had to be used to develop recommendations for different target groups, including e.g., policy-makers, research funders and civil society organisations. This showed the intention of the team to be more than researchers but also become activists, to ensure the research results were used for positive change with regards to the discriminated groups that were the subject of the research. This initial intention was strengthened during the project execution due to the nature of the research activities that included many collaborations with external stakeholders. The organisations and people who took care of the needs of the most vulnerable during the pandemic were both subjects of the research as well as partners included in the many expert workshops and Open Studios.

The expertise and experience of these activists was pertinent and invaluable. This symbiosis and the collaborations between researchers and activists created value and confronted the researchers with the limitations of their work, the need for activism, and to translate the results into concrete actions to generate real impact for social, economic, and political chance.

Impactful results

Crisis, in the Merriam Webster dictionary, is defined as 'a time of intense difficulty or danger'. It is described using three logics: first, calamity and catastrophe; second, crossroads, critical point; and third, turning point, moment of truth. While this rather simplistic dictionary exercise captures the logic and complexity of crisis, it also captures the logic of the results of RESISTIRÉ. Catastrophe/calamity is captured by the research phase, where RESISTIRÉ conducted policy analysis and quantitative and qualitative research to produce insights to set a long-term foundation for solutions and innovations to contribute to an inclusive and creative crisis management and equal recovery for all. An overwhelming amount of data and evidence of calamity and catastrophe were collected and analysed over the course of the project (Axelsson et al., 2021; Cibin et al., 2021, 2022, 2023; Harroche et al., 2023; Sandström et al., 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Stovell et al., 2021, 2022), showing an overall increase in inequalities and new emerging inequalities, quantitative as well as qualitative, across all policy domains (Cibin & Linková, 2023; Horton et al., 2023; Kent et al., 2023). The data – consisting of some 700 policy and civil societal responses, 300 rapid assessment surveys with thousands of respondents, 900 narrative interviews and semi-structured expert interviews, and fourteen pan-European workshops with 212 participants covering twenty-four months of crisis in thirty countries – consistently show how already marginalised and disadvantaged groups have become even more marginalised and disadvantaged; existing inequalities have increased, and new ones have emerged (Horton et al., 2023; Kent et al., 2023). We have called this catastrophe an exponential downward spiralling of inequalities (Axelsson et al., 2021).

The second component of the logic of crisis, the critical points, the crossroads – correspond to RESISTIRÉ's creative and co-created solutions. These include the results of our insights, creativity, and co-creation in Open Studios (Boyer at al., 2011; Kerremans et al., 2023a), which identify operational recommendations, set out new research agendas and designs pilot actions (Kerremans et al., 2023b). Our evidence also identified such critical points, crossroads in people's lives, in individuals and community groups, in civil society organisations and activism,

who collectively and in solidarity came together and worked to head for recovery (Sandström et al., 2023a, 2023b).

The third component of the logic of crisis, the turning points, moment of truth, corresponds to the dissemination and implementation – and the activism – of the RESISTIRÉ solutions, in collaboration with stakeholders and target groups. The impact of these set an immediate foundation for recovery and prepares us for the next crisis, so we can make better decisions and manage crisis better, more inclusively and in feminist solidarity next time. This is the core driving force of the project. This takes us to the last stages of RESISTIRÉ, and to the impact of insights, creativity, and solutions, via recommendations, research agendas, and pilot actions. That is then the moment of truth.

Catastrophe

Returning to the first stage of the logic of crisis: catastrophe and its insights. The evidence-base from which we make our knowledge claims and recommendations consists of gender+ (Verloo, 2007, 2013) and intersectional policy analysis, analysis of civil society initiatives, analysis of quantitative data from rapid assessment surveys, Eurostat and EuroFund, interviews with marginalised individuals and experts, workshops with academics, civil servants and civil society experts, and Open Studio workshops with a mix of experts, practitioners, artists, academics, activists, policy designers and others.

Overall, we collectively collected, mapped, and analysed 329 policies, 326 civil society initiatives, 300 rapid assessment surveys with thousands of respondents, 900 narrative interviews and semi-structured expert interviews. We conducted fourteen pan-European expert workshops with 212 participants from public authorities, civil society organisations, and academia, and twelve Open Studio workshops with 255 participants (e.g., teachers, health workers, policymakers, civil society representatives, public authority representatives, artists), co-creating twenty-one factsheets as operational recommendations with and for policy-makers, employers, research funders and civil society in three workshops with seventy-eight internal and external participants, and co-created, funded and evaluated the impact of nine pilot actions implemented by civil society organisations in different European countries; all in all covering thirty months of crisis in thirty countries.

The results show that inequalities in terms of gender, age, ethnicity/race, disability, social class, and LGBTQ+ increased across all policy domains: in work, employment, care, health, social protection, family, economy, education, violence, human rights, and in politics and decision-making itself (Cibin et al.,

2023; Horton et al., 2023; Kent et al., 2023). The results thus show that policy responses to the crisis did not manage to mitigate inequalities, as clearly and directly experienced by RESISTIRÉ's nearly 1500 interviewees, informants, and workshop participants. Instead, the results show that pandemic policy failed to include both the interests of women, LGBTQ+ persons, migrants, and other marginalised in the content of pandemic policy, and also failed to include the voices and interests of feminist, migrant and LGBTQ+ groups in the policy-making process (Cibin et al., 2021, 2022, 2023). Overall, pandemic policy failed to sufficiently address gender and multiple inequalities as ontologically diverse and intersectional, in line with previous policy in the European policy-making landscape and approaches to inequalities (Verloo, 2006).

Crossroads

The overall results, and the growing pool of research on the pandemic outside of the RESISTIRÉ project, gathered substantial knowledge on the negative effects of the pandemic on inequalities. While the lack of attention to these effects in recovery policies is apparent, the importance of acknowledging these inequalities in building future resilience to crisis has also been highlighted. In addition, the pandemic has been recognised as a potentially disruptive moment in history that may lead to systemic change, but there has been significantly less overall attention on what practices may transform/change inequalities, and very little attention to individual agency. When intersectional inequalities were not been mitigated by policy, and where structures and systems largely failed to protect the most marginalised and vulnerable, the RESISTIRÉ project switched focus and explored what kind of agency is or may be practiced by marginalised groups and front-line workers, stressing what enabled or hindered strategic agency.

The results show that there is agency and capacity to act at the individual and collective levels (Sandström et al., 2023a, 2023b). Significantly less pandemic research and innovation have paid attention to these capacities to act at the critical points, at the crossroads of crisis, but people do act. Women, men, non-binary people, migrants, students, activists, and others found ways to not just get by or get out of difficult situations in crisis, but they also found ways to strategically navigate the crisis by getting back at and getting organised – to draw on Lister's agency framework (2004, 2020). RESISTIRÉ identified the many better stories of individual agency and civil societal responses to the gender+ impacts of crisis – because we dared to look for them (Sandström & Strid, 2022). The decision to look not just for the increasing inequalities and their downward spiralling, was based on the underlying RESISTIRÉ use of the better stories concept (Georgis,

2013) and inspired by Lister's work on strategic agency (2004, 2015, 2020). This was formulated during one of three workshops on the RESISTIRÉ research agendas and was enabled by the innovative three-cycle methodological approach, where the consortium could learn from previous cycles and re-define, or tweak, the research agendas of the subsequent cycles.

The notion of strategic agency refers to the way marginalised individuals cope with their vulnerabilities in ways that envision a better future. People use both individual or personal agency and political agency, and they do so in both 'everyday' and 'strategic' ways. Personal everyday agency includes 'getting by' the best one can with available resources and in one's circumstances, and finding means to 'get out' of a troublesome situation. Political everyday agency includes 'getting back at' the system through micro-level acts of resistance, and political strategic agency refers to collective organisation, 'getting organised', in order to make political claims. A key finding of this analysis was that nearly half of the narratives included components or revolved around getting organised. These narratives are thus counter-stories of agency, collective actions, and inclusive social practices that mitigate inequalities; they tell a counter-story to the dominant narrative of marginalisation, positivity, and exclusion. They capture the turning points and are better stories of the pandemic.

This is a key result and impact of RESISTIRÉ: to have uniquely been able to identify and analyse a range of individual and collective better stories, and forms of agency exercised by individuals and civil servants (Kent et al., 2023). RESISTIRÉ has thereby been able to use its insights on inequalities, capacities to act, and collective organising, as better stories to stake out directions for solutions that lead to impacts via operational recommendations, future research agendas, and pilot actions for how to build inclusive crisis responses and turn crisis around (Altınay et al., 2022, 2023; Kerremans et al., 2023b).

We co-designed and supported nine innovative solutions, pilot actions, to turn crisis around. These are pilot actions where the design, methodologies, tools etc., are available for further uptake; for others to take on (See Figure 1.1). For example, in Türkiye, the pilot Caring Workspaces was implemented with the aim to re-imagine organisational culture and the working environment as inclusive, diverse, safe and caring from a gender+ perspective; an environment where organisational schemes that ensure better work-life balance, as well as the physical and mental health needs of all employees, are taken into account and where everyone's unique contribution and creativity is recognised and rewarded (see Chapter 4).
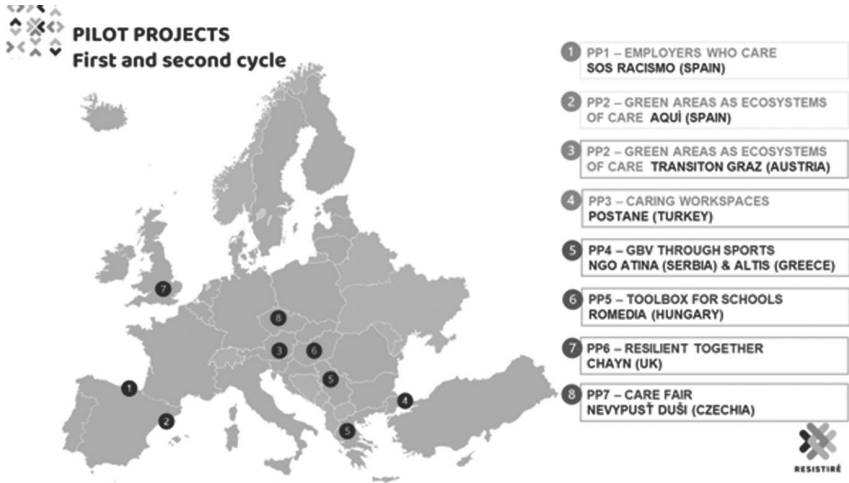
Figure 1.1: The RESISTIRÉ innovations as pilot actions

Moment of truth

Continuing with the logic of crisis. We experienced and analysed the catastrophe. We identified and acted at the critical points, and we created and implemented at the turning points. What remains is the moment of truth, when we learn from crisis and change to do better next time.

What have we learnt? RESISTIRÉ summarised this in a set of twenty-one operational recommendations, produced as RESISTIRÉ factsheets (see Table 1.1), to support policy-makers, advisers, employers, and civil society organisations in understanding the social, economic, political, and environmental effects of COVID-19 policy responses on gender+ equality, and to suggest practical recommendations to mitigate those effects (Kerremans et al., 2023a). These recommendations also serve to safeguard against the societal impacts of future crises by offering operational recommendations to counter negative developments and ameliorate situations that arose as a result of the pandemic. The factsheets cover topics such as gender-based violence, gender mainstreaming, care, institutional crisis preparedness and resilience, as well as a fair and inclusive recovery. The latter is especially pertinent when looking at the project's gender+ analysis of the proposed measures of the policy responses to the pandemic, not least the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (Cibin et al., 2022).

Table 1.1: RESISTIRÉ Factsheets with operational recommendations

Factsheet	Target Group(s)
Pandemic and gender mainstreaming. Decades of work towards intersectional gender mainstreaming wiped out during the crisis!	Policy-makers
Ensuring gender-balanced decision-making and the involvement of civil society	Policy-makers and CSOs
Gender equality plans should be mandatory for hospitals	Employers (hospitals) and policy-makers
Green for everyone. Promoting green spaces and mitigating gentrification	Policy-makers, CSOs and employers
Care and crisis: Fostering a paradigm shift	Employers and policy-makers
Reinforcing EU level action to combat gender-based violence through the Istanbul Convention	Policy-makers
Improving national responses to gender-based violence: Lessons from the pandemic crisis	Policy-makers
Telework as a double-edged sword: Risks and opportunities	Employers and policy-makers
Crisis management for all: Inclusive, multi-actor crisis management	Policy-makers
Gender-based violence during crises: Risk assessment, prevention and effective response	Policy-makers and key stakeholders like the police, social services, and CSOs
Creating safe digital spaces	Policy-makers, tech and social media companies, education stakeholders, employers
Education: Developing resilient education systems	Education stakeholders (i.e., schools, parents, teachers, associations), policy-makers, CSOs

Factsheet	Target Group(s)
The missing perspectives of women in the national recovery and resilience plans	Policy-makers
Striving for social justice: Vulnerable groups in the recovery policies	Policy-makers
Mental health support in times of crisis	Policy-makers, employers, education stakeholders, medical practitioners
Access to health services for vulnerable groups	Public health policy-makers, CSOs, activists, equality bodies
Digital transformation for an inclusive post-COVID recovery	Policy-makers (members of the European Commission for 'A Europe Fit for the Digital Age'), CSOs
Promoting sustainable and resilient long-term care	Policy-makers, care service providers, activists
Approaching the crisis as a continuum: Learning from an inclusive feminist crisis response	Policy-makers, CSOs, activists
Transformative funding: A pathway for creative and effective crisis response	Funding organisations
More intersectional data	Policy-makers, European-level statistics bodies
Addressing poverty and social exclusion: A feminist perspective	Policy-makers, street-level bureaucrats, CSOs

Sources: (Aglietti et al., 2023; Altınay et al., 2022, 2023; Denis, 2022; Ghidoni et al., 2023; Kerremans et al., 2022a, 2022b; Kolasinska et al., 2023; Linková et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d; Lionello et al., 2023; López Belloso et al., 2022; Rossetti et al., 2023; Sandström et al., 2023a, 2023b; Strid et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Tzanakou et al., 2022; Živković & Lionello, 2022; Živković et al., 2022a, 2022b).

What have we learnt from crisis, what do we need to do better? First, there are persistent data gaps: we need comparable and harmonised data at European level on the gender pay gap, gender-based violence, decision making and environmental justice. Second, there are pandemic policy gaps: marginalised groups are excluded in both content and process of policy-making. Third, we need to see the counter narratives that challenge dominant discourses, and underline resourcefulness and collaborative capacities to cope. Fourth, we need progressive,

transformative funding: short term, project based, unpredictable funding is detrimental for civil society. Fifth, we have learnt the importance of understanding and addressing crisis as a continuum. Crisis is not a one-off event, it is a continuum of actions, events, counter events, sometimes fast, sometimes slow. And sixth, we have learnt that we are stronger when we create alliances across inequality grounds, across domains, and in coalitions with public authorities. Creating coalitions formed by CSOs and public organisations has emerged as an essential element for effective crisis management for the most vulnerable. To conclude, what we have learnt from our results is that turning calamity into recovery requires multidisciplinary teams; innovative methodologies that break silos, stimulate creative thinking, and push us out of our comfort zones; and inclusive feminist gender+ responses.

Beyond the horizon: Concluding notes on our journey

As we reflect on the achievements and core principles that underpin the RESISTIRÉ project, it becomes evident that this endeavour has far surpassed its initial expectations. The sheer scale of the project, characterised by the management of a huge database of knowledge, is a testament to the unwavering dedication and collaborative spirit of all those involved. This vast repository of information encapsulates the magnitude of the work undertaken, illustrating the project's commitment to comprehensively understanding the impacts and dynamics of crisis and resilience.

Integral to the project's success has been the meticulous design and implementation of its research methodologies. This approach not only facilitated the collection of data but also fostered a culture of co-creation and critical thinking among participants clearly rooted in feminist methodologies and epistemology. The RESISTIRÉ project stands as an example of how collaboration can yield innovative solutions to complex problems.

At its core, the RESISTIRÉ project champions the principles of democracy as highlighted by Mieke Verloo in her closing speech at the project's final conference in Brussels June 2023, serving as a beacon to guide research in an era marked by unprecedented challenges. In an increasingly complex and polarised world, the recognition of the importance of democratic values in crisis response becomes even more crucial. The project's commitment to democracy takes on added significance when considering the rise of anti-gender movements and the emergence of extreme-right ideologies.

In the face of these challenges, the RESISTIRÉ project stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of democratic principles. It reminds us that, even as

anti-gender movements attempt to erode the progress made in gender equality and the extreme right seeks to undermine fundamental democratic institutions, the principles of transparency, participation, and accountability must remain steadfast.

Anti-gender movements often promote regressive views on gender roles and equality, posing a direct challenge to the principles of inclusivity and equity that underpin democracy. In this context, the RESISTIRÉ project's commitment to understanding and promoting gender equality within the framework of democratic values becomes a potent counterforce.

Similarly, extreme right ideologies can undermine the very foundations of democracy, including freedom of speech, civil liberties, and the rule of law. By highlighting the importance of transparency and inclusiveness in crisis response, encouraging active participation of diverse voices, and holding institutions accountable, the RESISTIRÉ project not only contributes to gender equality but also reinforces the resilience of democratic systems. Therefore, the RESISTIRÉ project's emphasis on democracy is not just a theoretical stance but a practical response to the challenges of our times. It stands as a shield against the erosion of democratic values.

One of the project's notable achievements lies in its focus on promising practices amidst dynamic crisis phenomena. The insights gleaned from this endeavour are more than just data; they represent the examples of resilience in the face of adversity. These stories have the potential to drive knowledge transfer, enabling societies and institutions to learn from one another's experiences and adapt to future challenges more effectively.

Looking ahead, the RESISTIRÉ project opens doors to a myriad of follow-up ideas. Comparative analyses across countries can offer valuable insights into the adaptability of crisis response strategies in diverse contexts. Additionally, the project has highlighted the often-forgotten aspect of collective trauma during crises, inviting further exploration and understanding.

Furthermore, the RESISTIRÉ project has laid the foundation for a robust theoretical framework that deepens our comprehension of the intricate relationship between crisis and democracy. This theoretical foundation paves the way for more in-depth research, shedding light on the mechanisms through which democratic principles and equality can be harnessed to enhance resilience in times of turmoil.

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Sofia Strid and Alain Denis

Research project methodology during and about crisis for innovations to address inequalities

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to describe and discuss the methodology, methodological choices and their consequences in relation to a research and innovation project – on and during crisis – for innovation and better policy.

Overall, the chapter engages with a multi-disciplinary and novel research methodology – based on co-creation and innovation – driven by design-thinking, and deployed to generate robust, rapid, and inclusive evidence-based solutions to complex problems. Specifically, it addresses the methodology used in RESISTIRÉ, which was grounded in feminist theory and based on mixed methods, co-creation, and participatory approaches (Denis & Strid, 2024). Repeated in three insight, creativity, solution, and outcome cycles, the methodology combined research of the impacts of policies, and the translation of research results into insights in order to co-create operational tools, disseminate knowledge, develop policy recommendations and empower stakeholders and end-users to exploit project results.

Methodology is a set of concepts, methods and techniques combined to reach a predefined objective. The term is however associated with a wide variety of meanings. Most commonly, it simply refers to, or is conflated with, 'method', to the scientific field studying methods, or to meta-reflections of underlying assumptions of ontology and epistemology of a more philosophical nature. In this chapter, we distinguish methodology from methods by conceptualising methodology as a research strategy and design, with specific choices of underpinning concepts and theories, including the consequences thereof, while the term 'methods' is reserved for modes of data collection.

The chapter is structured as follows: the next section introduces some key challenges in crisis research. It then describes the 'material', i.e. the RESISTIRÉ methodology for research and innovation of/in crisis, including each of the methods applied in research, co-creation, solutions, and outcomes. Then follows the 'findings', i.e. the creation of synergies and the challenge of multi-disciplinarity. Next, the specific issues and challenges faced are discussed,

and the promises and pitfalls identified. The chapter ends with conclusions and recommendations.

Research on and during crisis as a new multidisciplinary field

The field of crisis research, a comparatively new research field that has grown steadily since the 1980s and exponentially since 2010, is characterised by fragmentation, insular traditions, and epistemological pluralism. With the incidence and impact of crises appearing to be increasing, the significance of crisis research and the need for better solutions and recommendations are intensified. Therefore, to develop innovative methodologies to produce solutions is crucial. Methodology is always a challenge, no matter the topic or field of research, particularly in research with so called vulnerable groups (Liamputtong, 2007; Von Benzon & Van Blerk, 2017). These challenges include e.g., particular requirements from research ethics boards placed on researchers, the inclusion of members of vulnerable groups in the research process (from conception to result generation), considerations of risks versus benefits of the study, principles of do no harm, and issues related to power inequalities and inequities (Liamputtong, 2007; Medeiros, 2017; Von Benzon & Van Blerk, 2017).

For research in times of crisis, and crisis research for innovation, there are further elements creating methodological challenges. For research for innovation and better policy during a health crisis specifically, these include the fact that health workers are essential as sources of information – as informants and research and innovation participants, but they are not available as they are often overburdened by dealing with the crisis itself, and its consequences. While health workers and their knowledge and experience are a potential solution and valuable source, they are not reachable, as it would be unethical to demand their time and energy.

Then there are the methodological challenges of the field of crisis itself. Crisis researchers have been unable to agree on definitions or typologies concerning the events that interest them; for example, economists typically address each crisis as a singular event, whereas Marxist-inspired crisis theory, by contrast, view the tendency to crisis as inherent in, and a fundamental contradiction of, capitalism. Further, while not unique to crisis research, but rather a characteristic of most burgeoning fields, crisis research is fragmented into a multiplicity of approaches, discussed in specialised journals, and at the periphery of the mainstream (James et al., 2011). This has resulted in the lack of shared core concepts, typologies, and coherent models to synthesise

or integrate different disciplinary approaches and perspectives (Buchanan & Denyer, 2012). Finally, crisis researchers have been 'required to adopt designs and methods considered unconventional in other areas, and to use data from sources normally considered unreliable and biased' (Buchanan & Denyer, 2012, p. 205); qualitative studies, theory-building based on idiosyncratic cases and small-N studies dominate the field. This latter issue is certainly related to the empirical – real world – condition of crisis, specifically to time (or rather, the lack thereof) to study crisis. There is a need to produce results fast to help solve the crisis and address its consequences, and to provide operational insights to those in charge of crisis management. For these reasons, researchers need to move out of their/our (research) comfort zones and turn focus to outreach and advocacy, thus becoming activists in a context of need for fast, yet robust, results and to have an impact on the crisis. This is where methodology becomes key. Methodology is certainly essential to all research and innovation; bad methodology ruins research, but especially in times of crisis. With the shifting roles and responsibilities of research and researchers in times of crisis, a solid methodology stands as the guarantor of the robustness and evidence-base of the recommendations advocated. Yet, the choice of methodology is often subjective, path-dependent, and 'safe', rather than innovative.

The methodology

The RESISTIRÉ methodology was designed to gather robust evidence, co-create innovative solutions, and have an impact during the project lifetime. The overall methodology to the study of and in crisis was participatory, and based on co-creative, solution and innovation driven design-thinking, inspired by feminist theory, with a step-by-step process running in three cycles of eight, seven, and six months respectively over a total period of 30 months. Each of the three cycles consisted of four steps: (1) research leading to insights, (2) co-creation in workshops (Open Studios): (3) development of solutions and innovations, and (4) outcomes and impacts (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2).
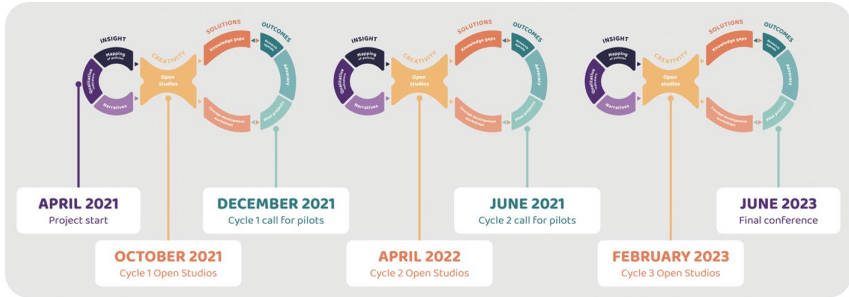
Figure 2.1: The RESISTIRÉ methodological step-by-step three cycle process

The RESISTIRÉ methodology thereby combined *researching* the impacts of the outbreak policies, *translating* results into insights in order to *develop* operational tools, *disseminating* knowledge, *developing policy recommendations* and *empowering* stakeholders to *exploit project results*. The end objective was to empower stakeholders, including but not limited to decision-makers and policy-makers, to reduce inequalities. All research and action-research were organised to have activities in the three cycles, feeding results into and learning from each other. At the end of each cycle, the operational results were promoted and disseminated.

RESISTIRÉ used a participatory approach, where project partners, stakeholders, and end-users were involved throughout the whole process and cycles, with techniques from consultation to co-creation. This required starting with the recruitment of experts in NGOs and social work at an early stage, already during the first two months of the project. These were brought together in workshops and assisted in the recruitment of individuals for the implementation of the qualitative research activities. The translation of research results into operational insights and tools was done in a step-by-step process with co-design Open Studios at each step. Users and stakeholders were mixed with researchers from the consortium team in these studios. The figure below (Figure 2.2) illustrates the four steps – insight, creativity, solutions, and outcomes – in each cycle as well as the speed of execution of the cycles mentioning milestones.
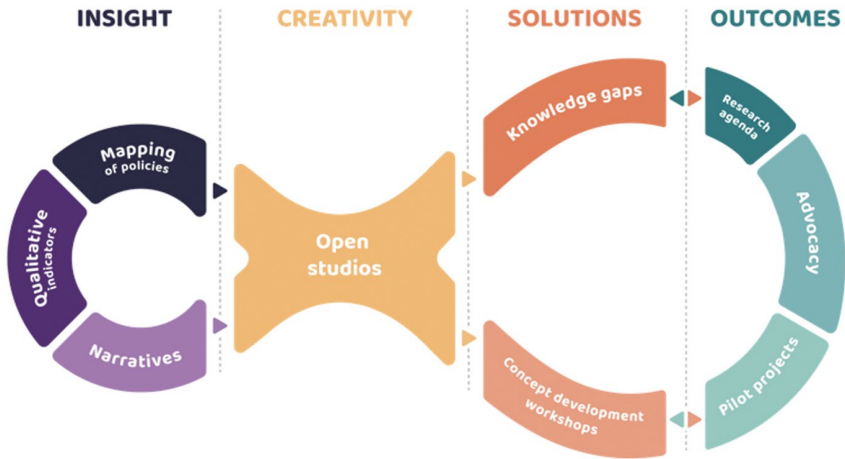
Figure 2.2: The RESISTIRÉ four-steps approach

Insights

The insights step used three methods for data collection running in parallel, each running in the three cycles of six to eight months: policy and societal initiatives analysis (Cibin et al., 2021a, 2022, 2022a), quantitative analysis (Harroche et al., 2023; Stovell et al., 2021, 2022), and qualitative analysis (Axelsson et al., 2021; Sandström et al., 2022, 2023a). For each cycle, an overall theoretical framework and research objectives were set. The data included policy documents and recovery policy (e.g., the national recovery and resilience plans), civil societal initiatives, Rapid Assessment Surveys (RAS), pan-European workshops and semi-structured interviews with public authority experts, and civil society representatives, and individual narrative interviews (see Table 2.1). All data were collected by national experts in native languages, consisting of researchers from the consortium and experts recruited from an already established European network. The group of 31 national researchers (NRs) covered the EU27 (except for Malta, hereinafter EU26), Iceland, Serbia, Türkiye, and the UK. All NRs were trained in the three types of methods applied, provided with interview guidelines, interview scripts, analytical scripts, and reporting templates. A data collection helpdesk was available throughout the duration of the data collection (see Chapter 7). The collection broadly focused on the impacts on inequalities in the domains of the EC Gender Equality Strategy (2020–25) (EC, 2019) and the UN

Beijing Platform. With a few marginal expectations, data were collected evenly between the countries.

Table 2.1: Data collected and analysed, including by country breakdown

Data	Number	Country coverage
Policy*	329	EU26, Iceland, Serbia, Türkiye, UK
Civil societal initiatives*	326	EU26, Serbia, Türkiye, UK
Rapid assessment surveys	316	EU26, Serbia, v, UK
Narratives*	793	EU26, Iceland, Serbia, Türkiye, UK
Workshops	14 (212 participants)	EU26, Türkiye, UK
Expert interviews	102	EU26, Türkiye, UK

*For access to policy data, see Cibin et al. (2021b, 2022b); for and civil societal initiatives, see Cibin et al. (2021c); for narrative data, see Strid et al. (2023a, 2023b)

The first activity, the mapping of COVID-19 policy responses and societal responses and their evolution over time, was necessary to understand the research results in context, and to analyse the role played by the responses. The activity analysed national and European health policy responses to outbreaks in 31 countries, and included designing the theoretical and conceptual framework, recruitment, and training (jointly with the quantitative and qualitative data activities) of the NRs, data collection, and reporting. In total, 329 polices and 326 civil societal initiatives were analysed. The number of polices and civil societal responses were evenly distributed across all countries, with a few marginal exceptions. Societal responses to the policy to support specific target groups and mitigate the adverse effects of the policies on inequalities were identified, and screened to identify promising and inspiring practices, called 'better stories' in RESISTIRÉ – a concept borrowed from Dina Georgis (2013), before being documented and disseminated. The data collection and initial analysis was facilitated by the NRs, resulting in four extensive reports (Cibin et al., 2021a, 2022a, 2023; Cibin & Linková, 2023).

The second activity, the quantitative indicators of inequalities, collected and analysed quantitative, comparative indicators to measure and monitor the economic, social, and environmental impacts of health policies. First, existing data

and indicators – harmonised and comparable at European level – were analysed to understand what could become rupture points (similar to those noticed in 2008 after the financial crisis) in the context of COVID-19 over time. Second, RAS that emerged at the initiative of lobby groups, scientists or official agencies were identified and mapped with the help of the NR network, i.e. the same researchers who conducted the data collection and initial analysis of policy and civil society initiatives and the narratives. Links were established with the most interesting of the identified RAS to collaborate and exchange data in the second and third cycle of the quantitative data collection and analysis (Stovell et al., 2021, 2022). Third, a primary data collection app was developed to measure behavioural responses as well as impacts of/on the population, particularly within gender+ data gaps identified through all activities (Harroche et al., 2023; Horton et al., 2023). This last method was a risk, aimed at collecting large scale quantitative data fast – addressing the problem of small-N crisis research – as time pressure was a methodological limitation.

The third activity, the qualitative indications, collected and analysed qualitative data on the most salient inequalities during COVID-19, including those produced by the outbreak and by its policy and societal responses. Three methods for data collection were used: workshops, semi-structured interviews, and narrative interviews. The first step was to design the conceptual and methodological framework, consisting of theory and concepts, and guidelines and templates for data collection and analysis, and train the NRs via three online sessions. The theoretical and methodological frameworks were developed together with the research leaders of the mapping of policy and societal responses and of the research on quantitative indicators, with feedback provided by all project partners (Axelsson et al., 2021; Cibin et al., 2021a; Stovell et al., 2021). The second step was to recruit informants and initiate data collection in EU26, Iceland, Serbia, Türkiye, and the UK. Data were collected via three methods: (a) Fourteen pan-European workshops with ten–twelve national level experts/first line assistance to specific target groups (often NGOs); (b) complementary interviews with experts in local public authorities (n=71) and civil society (n=31); and (c) insights on lived and observed experiences collected via individual narratives (n=793), (see Table 2.1), resulting in four extensive reports (Axelsson et al., 2021; Sandström et al., 2022, 2023; Kent et al., 2023). The narrative interviews were fairly evenly distributed across the EU26, Serbia, Türkiye and the UK (see Table 2.2). The narrative technique allowed for a fast modus collection of high-quality data, where diverse experiences, attitudes and behaviours throughout Europe were collected. The narratives informed the development of personas (used in step two, creativity (see below), which ensured that the workshop participants designed operational

recommendations through the lenses of the lived and observed experiences of individuals (Denis & Strid, 2024; Strid & Denis, 2024).

Table 2.2: Narratives per country

Country	Narratives(N)	Country	Narratives(N)
Austria	31	Italy	27
Belgium	26	Latvia	26
Bulgaria	26	Lithuania	23
Croatia	27	Luxembourg	25
Cyprus	26	Netherlands	26
Czech Republic	26	Poland	26
Denmark	26	Portugal	26
Estonia	25	Romania	26
Finland	26	Serbia	26
France	26	Slovenia	29
Germany	27	Slovakia	26
Greece	29	Spain	26
Hungary	26	Sweden	27
Iceland	26	Türkiye	27
Ireland	28	United Kingdom	26

Source: Strid et al., 2023a, 2023b

Creativity

The second methodological step was creativity through co-creation, an action-oriented analysis of the results of step 1 (insights). The activities were designed to interpret the results coming of the three research activities in that first step. The method used was the multi-disciplinary, co-design format of Open Studios (Kerremans et al., 2021, 2023a; Kerremans & Denis, 2020a, 2020b). Open Studios are inspired by co-design type of workshops developed to design policies

in a participative way (Boyer et al., 2011). Open Studios in RESISTIRÉ brought together multiple expertise, including the user experience.[1] The original concept had a duration of five full days, whereas RESISTIRÉ used two days. Four Open Studios were organised per cycle, altogether twelve, of which three were face-to-face and nine online. During the Open Studio, participants went through periods of divergence (exploring in an open way, brainstorming) and of convergence (bringing ideas together into concepts of potential solutions). Different exercises shaped this process. Inputs from the research came in different forms. One of them were personas, created on the basis of the results of step 1 (insigths). Personas that were used for Open Studio participants to empathise with the target group are archetypes of real persons. It is a technique that allows to put the target group of the co-designed solutions at the centre of the design process (e.g., Nielsen & Storgaard Hansen, 2014). The vast number of narratives served as inspiration for the development of tailored sets of personas, unique for each Open Studio. A second technique was the use of 'better stories'. These are examples of inspiring (rather than good) practices that were used to find ways to make them even better, thus contributing to identifying routes for innovations and even better solutions (see Chapter 9 for the better stories approach) (see Chapter 3 for a detailed description of the Open Studio approach and a critical comparison with other participatory methods from a feminist perspective). The output consisted of ideas of concrete action, input for recommendations to re-shape policies and questions that still needed to be answered (missing insights or knowledge gaps); feeding into the third methodological step, solutions.

Solutions

The third methodological step, solutions, was an operational impact step which developed concrete outputs for health policy-makers and different stakeholders based on the directions proposed from the Open Studios in the preceding step, creativity. This was done through three activities running in parallel. First, the development of operational recommendations for health policy-makers and stakeholders. These recommendations were developed and presented as factsheets (see Chapter 1 for a full list of factsheets) to different types of policy-makers (EU, national, regional, local levels) and for different types of stakeholders (first line of care, NGOs assisting vulnerable groups). Second, the development and launch

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1   A network of experts, including public health experts, experts of the first line of care (frontline workers, practitioners), experts on different domains of inequalities, experts on (vulnerable) target groups of interest, was mobilised for each of the workshops.

of pilot projects that were designed to illustrate the proposed policy (Kerremans et al., 2023b). Here, ideas that were generated in the Open Studios were designed as concrete actions, including objectives, target groups, approach, impacts, and cost-benefit. Seven actions were developed conducive to the launch of a pilot project, which can be considered as prototyping the action. The other actions were published as 'promising practices', for others to use or be inspired by. Third, the development of an agenda for future research to fill the knowledge gaps as identified in the Open Studios and via the systematic monitoring of the preliminary analyses of quantitative and qualitative data in each cycle (Živković et al., 2021; Kerremans & Denis, 2022a; Kerremans et al., 2023b). These gaps were summarised in open access reports and promoted to the research and research funding communities, to be taken up by researchers who study inequalities and impact of outbreaks on public health as well as by research funding organisations preparing calls for proposals (Sandström et al., 2022; Sandström & Strid, 2022; Živković et al., 2022a).

Outcomes

The fourth methodological step was designed to ensure maximum impact both in terms of new knowledge generated and in making the results useable for policy-making in response to the outbreaks. It was a clear ambition of the consortium to ensure new knowledge and solutions would be advocated towards stakeholders and decision-makers during the project. While the overall work was coordinated by one partner, the different tasks, including the development of the overall impact strategy, the dissemination of knowledge, the promotion of operational recommendations, and the promotion of the research agenda, were led by different partners – and involving all partners – hence ensuring the inclusion of multiple experiences, methods, and knowledges in the projects' pursuit of evidence-based policy impact. Concretely, for policy-making uptake, the step mainly used the twenty-two factsheets[2] collaboratively produced in step three (see Chapter 1), and a series of webinars to empower health authorities to improve decision-making and consider the many impacts of their decisions on

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2   For the Factsheets, see the RESISTIRÉ Community on zenodo.org, and (Aglietti et al., 2023; Altınay et al., 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Denis, 2022; Ghidoni et al., 2023; Kerremans & Lionello, 2022; Kerremans et al., 2022c, 2022d; Kolasinska et al., 2023; Linková et al., 2022abc; Lionello et al., 2023; López Belloso et al., 2022; Rossetti et al., 2023; Sandström et al., 2023b; Strid et al., 2022ab; Tzanakou et al., 2022; Živković & Lionello, 2022; Živković et al., 2022b).

inequalities. For knowledge dissemination, more than twenty-five articles and chapters, and two books were published. For influencing research funders and future research agendas, a webinar on research agendas was organised with research funders, as well as a panel on 'Transformative funding as a pathway for creative and effective crisis response' as part of a conference in Istanbul in September 2023 (see Altınay, 2023b).

Communication activities were actively and regularly implemented, with efforts increasing significantly towards the end of each of the three cycles. The project's news and results, including the selection of Better Stories, pilot projects and recommendations were promoted through campaigns on social media, regular posting of blog posts, newsletters, press releases, and engagement with sister projects. A substantial number of national and international events were organised or participated in, and the partners put in considerable efforts in advocating the uptake of the recommendations by policy-makers, across all domains covered by the project. As a result of these efforts, it is estimated that by the end of the project over 3,000 event participants were informed of RESISTIRÉ's research, and key policy stakeholders received and engaged with its recommendations; 380 individuals participated in webinars organised by the project, while its final conference gathered a total of 243 participants.

In addition to the general communication and dissemination objectives, the outcomes step created a living Community of Stakeholders to ensure the stakeholders attention and involvement throughout the project lifetime. Over the thirty months of project activities, a wide range of stakeholders have engaged with the RESISTIRÉ project. It has been estimated that we reached over 100 000 stakeholders.

Methodology in crises: Consequences of the methodological choices and lessons learnt

The need to provide fast results in a context of rapid change was essential but had some consequences. In an attempt to adequately respond to the rapidly changing situation concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, the data collection process was divided into three fast-paced research cycles addressing a broad variety of topics. While this rapid research approach allowed for a quick gathering of answers to the most pressing issues arising from different phases of the pandemic, it also limited the consortium's capacity to conduct a detailed, in-depth analysis of the problems. Consequently, the operational outcomes produced are not exhaustive and could most certainly be enriched by further investigations. Further key consequences of the methodological choices, discussed below, include: an oversupply

of data without the capacity to exploit them; a lack of in-depth country contexts details for comparability; and the risk of over-generalisation.

Operational recommendations

This section highlights the lessons learnt from the process carried out in the task where operational recommendations were developed on the basis of the results from the preceding research phases and the outputs from the Open Studios. In total, twenty-two RESISTIRÉ factsheets were successfully developed, released and disseminated. Nevertheless, the research methodology applied in the project encompassed some challenges that needed to be overcome. The lessons learnt from these challenges are detailed below.

The first challenge was the need to provide fast results in a context of rapid change. As already mentioned, the data collection process was divided into three fast-paced research cycles addressing a broad variety of topics, so that the project could adequately respond to the rapidly changing situation concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. While this rapid research approach allowed for a quick gathering of answers to the most pressing issues arising from different phases of the pandemic, it also limited the consortium's capacity to conduct a detailed, in-depth analysis of the problem. Consequently, the operational outcomes produced on the basis of the RESISTIRÉ research findings are not exhaustive and could most certainly be enriched by further investigations.

The second challenge consisted of the fact that results from multiple methods had to be integrated, which led to an oversupply of data. The multi-method approach, incorporating the parallel collection of different types of data, provided a multidimensional understanding of the societal challenges the project had been facing on the one hand, but the plethora of data could not be fully exploited due to the relatively short duration of the project.

The third and final challenge consisted of utilising an EU-wide scope. In this regard, the cross-national analysis conducted by RESISTIRÉ presented some challenges. The risk of trying to formulate general European-level policy recommendations without taking into account differing national contexts (e.g., the quality of democracy, ideology of the ruling party, etc.) was that the proposed solutions could end up not reaching significant detail and depth. However, RESISTIRÉ endeavoured to circumvent problems of this kind, relying on the experience of each consortium partner to adopt an advocacy plan for the promotion of the policy guidelines that fit the specific national context.

Pilot projects

This section highlights the lessons learnt from the process of both transforming a selection of action-ideas from the Open Studios into well-structured calls for proposals for the implementation of pilot projects, as well as the selection of CSOs capable of making them a reality. Although clearly ambitious, the process put in place during two cycles, which was largely designed from scratch, ran smoothly and allowed for the launch of a larger number of calls than foreseen in the Grant Agreement with the European Commission (three instead of two in the first cycle and four instead of two in the second cycle). The following are some of the key lessons learnt from the process.

First of all, the ideas for pilot projects, as they came out of the Open Studios, were described in a schematic and concise document and shared with the consortium. This proved an effective method of providing sufficient information to the project partners, even to people who had not attended the Open Studio and had no further insight into the discussions that took place. The democratic voting process, whereby the consortium selects a limited number of ideas to develop further, went smoothly in RESISTIRÉ, but it could also have resulted in a more balanced distribution of preferences (i.e., no clear winners). In case of the latter, a second round of voting would have been necessary.

The task leader also learnt that it was useful to create a template for the call for proposals, consisting of a standard part and a customisable part. Responsibilities were distributed among different consortium partners to keep to the timeframe. Each pilot project had a lead for the drafting of the terms of reference and contributors. The template with its pre-defined structure eased this process when developing the documents. It also ensured that the many aspects involved in the implementation of a pilot project were covered, making it clearer to applicants what was expected of them. Nevertheless, it also proved essential to include an e-mail address in the call for proposals, so that applicants could request assistance and clear up any doubts they might have. The project concepts were also tested beforehand with potential applicants. This allowed to check the feasibility but also to integrate perspectives of potential applicants to be incorporated in the technical specifications.

Similarly, the task leader learnt that keeping the application form relatively simple, with a few questions to be answered and a clear word limit, eased the barriers for potential applicants to participate. It also helped the subsequent evaluation process to run smoothly and quickly. With regard to the receipt of proposals, it became clear that this is quite dependent on the timeframe and the time of year that the calls are opened and promoted: the fewest applications are likely

to be received if the call is launched and promoted in the summer period (as was the case in the second cycle) and is open for less than three weeks. Conversely, the highest number of applications is likely to be received if the call is launched in autumn/winter/spring (as in the first cycle) and is open for at least a month. This difficult timeframe was the consequence of the project design and the speed of execution.

In terms of facilitating the work of the jury members during the evaluation process, a guide was prepared for them, and specific e-mails were sent as regular reminders before the start of the evaluation. The evaluation template that was compiled and distributed to the evaluators beforehand also proved to be beneficial to the effectiveness and swiftness with which this process was conducted. Finally, as several applicants upon closure of the evaluation process asked to understand why their proposal had not been shortlisted or selected for funding, a feedback report template was also created to provide feedback – either to all candidates or to those who explicitly asked for it.

Agendas for future research

This section highlights the lessons learnt from the process carried out in the task in which agendas for future research were developed. The aim of the research agendas in the project was to identify knowledge gaps and formulate future research needs to understand, address, and mitigate behavioural, social, and economic inequalities produced by the policy and societal responses to COVID-19. In several ways, the overall structure and design of the project enabled and enriched the proposed agendas for future research. In total, sixteen thematic research agendas were developed (Živković et al., 2022a; Sandström & Strid, 2022; Sandström et al., 2023a), disseminated and promoted.

Crucially, involving a diverse range of actors in the research process enabled the project to identify knowledge gaps that may not have been immediately obvious within the scientific community. Moreover, the research agendas produced were discussed with different stakeholders in webinars organised after their completion.

The combined efforts of a consortium of multidisciplinary partners, from different fields of expertise and with different theoretical and methodological perspectives, provided a rich foundation of materials on which to base the research agendas. However, this richness also led to some challenges. Firstly, in terms of defining the scope of the research agendas, there was at times a certain degree of uncertainty whether these should focus on broad research areas or specific research questions. This first option risked being too general and superficial, while

the second risked being too narrow and context dependent. As such, this point also ties in with the point below about the potential benefits of national research agendas.

Secondly, as a wealth of research results were produced within the project itself, the research agendas were primarily based upon these findings. However, this was done with the risk of neglecting previous and ongoing research elsewhere. The inclusion of a more thorough review of existing research in light of the specific project results would have been desirable, but in that case, more time would have had to be allocated to review research. Thirdly, in retrospect, the resources within the project could have been used more efficiently through better alignment between the operational recommendations and the research agendas. They could have been harmonised in terms of themes which would have allowed for a shared review of the results and other, external, research results.

Finally, a major lesson learnt relates to the identification and the definition of stakeholders/target groups, where – in the context of multi-European partner collaborations – it is particularly important to consider:

- National variations between research funders and their respective remits, as stipulated by national regulations, e.g., the extent to which research funding organisations can shift funding into new, emerging, themes or not, and at what pace; at short notice or in the long term.
- National context and the positioning of, in the case of RESISTIRÉ, gender+ inequalities in the national policy work.
- Thematic research areas funded: Whether research funding organisations are already limited by focusing on specific thematic areas, or if they fund basic/ ground research.
- Private or public funding body: Whether the research funding organisation is privately or publicly funded. This makes a difference to their ability and willingness to engage in new, sometimes risky, research themes.

Lessons learnt to address these issues are the following:

- To include a mapping of research funding organisations on the national level, including the variables outlined above.
- Potentially focus on EU-level funders, at the expense of national research funding organisations, as this enables a more specific and dedicated formulation of the research agenda.
- Design the research agendas so that each consortium partner takes responsibility to develop a national (country-specific) research agenda, relevant to the specific national research funding context.

Despite a wealth of research and evidence on how COVID-19 and its policy and societal responses have either increased or created new gender+ inequalities, or sometimes mitigated or reduced them, major knowledge gaps remain. Some of these have been identified in the research agendas of the three cycles of RESISTIRÉ.

Another important lesson learnt concerns the need to broaden the research on the pandemic in order to understand better 'what works' and 'what needs to change and how'. Much of the pandemic research has focused on the negative effects of the pandemic, but significantly less attention has been paid to the counter-stories and 'better stories' of the pandemic. Such counter-stories can include individual and organisational agency, actions and practices, as well as actions and practices of inclusive feminist solidarity and support, that may mitigate inequalities and strengthen the resilience of individuals, organisations, and societies. Counter-stories to the dominant narrative include actions and inspiring practices to cope with the pandemic, giving voice to otherwise less visible and marginalised groups. Better stories are those that challenge the dominant narrative and are inclusive and representative of marginalised communities. Hence, they have the potential to challenge established orders, truths, and power structures. Dominant narratives often exclude and marginalise certain groups of people, but by re-telling stories that are more inclusive and representative of marginalised communities, these dominant narratives can be disrupted, and the analysis can contribute to the creation of more equitable and just societies. A research focus on better stories is therefore important in understanding the transition out of social exclusion and marginalisation and in supporting the ability to act and have an impact on society.

Conclusions: Ambitions, limitations and recommendations

The RESISTIRÉ methodology, based on co-creative and innovation driven design-thinking, mixed-methods, participatory techniques, and a step-by-step approach repeated in three cycles, constitutes an example of an innovative project methodology that is able to address some of the shortcomings of crisis research for innovation. To recap, these included: theory and the lack of agreed upon definitions or typologies concerning the events being researched; disciplinary fragmentation caused by multi-disciplinarity and a multiplicity of disciplinary approaches, the lack of overarching frameworks, core concepts, agreed typologies or coherent models to bind different perspectives together, and the often used qualitative small-N data from sources often considered unreliable or biased.

The RESISTIRÉ methodology addressed the first of these identified shortcomings by creating and adopting a core baseline theoretical framework. This included the analysis of inequalities in the same policy domains, using different methods – yet applying the same collaboratively developed theoretical framework, including the same conceptual understanding of inequalities, gender, gender+ theoretical framework. The basis was the same across all activities (gender+ intersectionality) in all cycles. The second identified shortcoming, relating to the disciplinary fragmentation, was addressed by tackling and incorporating multi-disciplinarity and multi-sectorality as core strengths by setting up the methodology to create synergies in and between theory, methods, knowledges, and activities. The key, but not the only example of how this was done concretely, include the positioning and role of the Open Studios, building on the results of all research activities, synthesising these in a new way to through divergence and convergence, to create new solutions (Denis & Strid, 2024). This involved all team members – with different disciplinary and sectoral backgrounds and mixing, internal team members with external stakeholders. Importantly, and in line with feminist research principles, the Open Studios became a common and safe space that stimulated creativity and cooperation, creating energy and enthusiasm. There was a feeling of ownership and pride of the method, and of the results that came out, supported by the enthusiasm of the invited participants/stakeholders (see Chapter 3). Additional choices addressing these shortcomings included the very composition of the consortium and division of responsibilities, with some – but not all – partners having specific leadership responsibilities of tasks, while those without the specific responsibility acting as 'free agents', creating time and space to 'travel' between activities.

In the final section below, we review the ambitions of the project as they were originally formulated identifying the achievements, but also limitations experienced during the project execution.

Social justice: RESISTIRÉ integrated multidisciplinary state-of-the-art research knowledge from natural science, social science and humanities, multisectoral experience-based knowledge, and co-creation in an innovative way to provide solutions for more social justice. The initial ambition was to equip and empower policy-makers with tools to produce equitable policy responses to disease outbreaks. The reality has been wider as results address crisis in general, multiple crises and crisis as a continuum (see Chapter 9) (Altınay et al., 2023). The choice of the gender+ theoretical framework played an important role in achieving this ambition. The first key ingredient for this achievement was a common understanding among all partners. The consortium had been built from partners who all had experience with gender+ and could apply it in a

coherent way from day one, without the need for alignment. The second ingredient was the systematic use of a gender+ approach to all activities and through all cycles. Gender+ was truly embedded and not a separate responsibility.

Rapid and open evidence: The project created a body of evidence and produced new inclusive gender+, multiple-domain state-of-the-art knowledge in a time of rapid change in thirty countries, with results available fast and openly. Literally all results are available for further research, including all methodological tools used.[3]

Research approach: In applying a genuinely multi-disciplinary approach and combining traditional research techniques with action research and design-thinking, RESISTIRÉ was truly innovative. The experience gained in applying such an approach created new knowledge in terms of methods for bridging science and society work faster and more effectively. These include:

- Organising regular cross-cutting workshops in parallel to the actual field and analytical work, as a method for exploration of potential synergies both theoretically and empirically.
- The role played by the Open Studios as all team members were involved in this activity.
- The multiple ad hoc teams that were created among consortium team members and external stakeholders and experts to work on specific tasks or outputs. One example at the level of research are the collaborations with organisations that executed RAS. Specific collaborations were set up with RAS to create a win-win. Each specific collaboration involved the task leader, but also at least one other consortium member and of course the RAS organiser. An example at the level of outputs, is the drafting of factsheets: ad hoc drafting teams were created with a lead from the consortium team, co-drafters from other consortium partners and in most cases at least one external expert. These multiple collaborations reinforced the bottom-up approach, permanent and transparent peer collaboration and critical revision of each other's work, valorising and mixing knowledge across disciplines and working in a respectful and non-hierarchic way.
- These very flexible arrangements were made possible through the project and consortium set-up. One of the consequences of the speed at which the proposal had to be written (two and a half weeks) is that it was impossible to make clear agreements on the sharing of work. The solution was on the one

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3   See the RESISTIRÉ Community on the open access database Zenodo, zenodo.org.

hand to concentrate management tasks within a few partners and on the other hand to spread (time) resources to most/all partners on most/all tasks. This created a freedom, openness and even eagerness of all partners to contribute, leading to these multiple collaborations and truly multi-disciplinary and collaborative executions, covering and interlinking all steps in the RESISTIRÉ project process.

Methodological pluralism: The project employed a methodology for comprehensive data collection that goes beyond using existing tools (such as secondary analysis of surveys, expert assessments and identification of priorities via workshops and individual interviews, collection of narratives, policy mapping).

Connecting research knowledge and policy development: With its focus on stakeholder engagement and co-creation, the project used the new research insights to support policy development. This was facilitated by the attention RESISTIRÉ paid to analysing increases and decreases in inequality; identifying the groups that lose out, or indeed 'win', during the outbreak as result of policy responses. The involvement of more than hundred stakeholders, including policy-makers in insights and co-creation workshops has been an essential leverage to reach this ambition.

The policy framework mapping has resulted in the development of a European policy baseline, to assess policy and societal responses in thirty countries, reflecting different welfare and gender regimes; geographic diversity, etc. thus depicting the specificity of national contexts. The tools to enhance policy debate and uptake attend both to policy content and policy process and include voices that are often marginalised. The comparative analysis of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans from a gender+ perspective is an example of how this ambition could be realised.

Sustainable processes and content: The ambition was to be sustainable through the knowledge and tools produced, but also in the ways in which they are produced, i.e. sustainable in both content and process. Knowledge and tools were produced in co-creation and to increase long-term impact. This always included measures to ensure equal, non-abusive, research practice within and around the project and not only in its results. This practice was a cornerstone and fundamental principle underpinning the ways of working, doing research, and policy development within the consortium and with stakeholders.

Speed at which results were made available: The approach with three cycles allowed to produce results soon after the start of the project (within eight months), to adapt to changes in a changing sanitary and political context as well as to learn from one cycle to the next.

Theoretical ambitions: From an epistemological and theoretical point of view, RESISTIRÉ adopted a gender+ and intersectional perspective, allowing for analysing new developments in multi-disciplinary COVID-19 research, including the intersections between gender and power differentials based on age, class, dis/abilities, ethnicity, nationality, racialisation, sexual orientation and other social divisions; intersections of societal dimensions and processes of continuity and change: culture, economy, violence, polity, sexuality, science and technology. The project has thereby advanced feminist theory by combining science and technology studies, intersectionality theory, health inequality theory and humanities to provide a base from which to theorise the complex relation of multiple inequalities, power axes, and privileges as simultaneously fluid and stable.

Finally, RESISTIRÉ had the ambition to advance ethical research practices. Research into inequalities, vulnerable and precarious groups pose specific ethical concerns, as outlined in the first section of the chapter. While the project has created novel knowledge on researching vulnerable groups and ethically charged topics, we failed in our ambition to develop an inventory of lessons learnt which would have comprised an analysis of the ethical issues raised during the whole life of the project, and how these were solved. Such inventory could have communicated recommendations and experiences gained throughout the project to other researchers, with a view to advancing research practice. The final lesson learnt therefore takes the form of a recommendation to other researchers and to ourselves to pick up this challenge.

In conclusion, and to distil the messages of this final section, a key innovation of RESISTIRÉ, in terms of research project methodology, lies in the ways in which it further developed a participatory and co-creative research project methodology, and implemented it on research and innovation in thirty countries, and into a new field– in crisis research and innovation – while constantly allowing ourselves to look for – and allowing ourselves to see – the better stories.

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Open studios as a methodology: Exploring opportunities and challenges in design thinking for collaborative feminist research approaches

Introduction

In the early stages of the pandemic, it became evident that mainstream policy measures intended to address the crises' effects frequently lacked a gender equality perspective. Urgent actions from public, private and civil society organisations were needed to tackle gendered challenges. These included, e.g., an upsurge in domestic violence, societal lockdowns, closures of schools, as well as escalating pressure on frontline workers, often in professions dominated by women (Axelsson et al., 2021). Simultaneously, there was a scarcity of existing knowledge to guide the design of necessary policies, measures and interventions. In 2021, the RESISTIRÉ research and innovation project was launched with the aim to develop sustainable solutions to gendered inequalities caused by the pandemic and its policy and societal responses, and to strengthen societal resilience to future outbreaks (see Chapters 1 and 2).

This chapter describes the development and implementation of the Open Studio method in the RESISTIRÉ project. Through the Open Studios, design-thinking – i.e., a people-centred approach that involves a collective effort to understand, experiment and act in addressing challenges – was combined with feminist research methodologies to develop solutions that could mitigate the increasing gender inequalities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in a series of collaborative and co-creative workshops.

This collaborative feminist research approach to the Open Studio methodology was underpinned by a gender+ theoretical framework, which, in its practical application, focuses on examining intersecting inequalities in policies and their outcomes (Lombardo et al., 2017; Verloo, 2013). It recognises the interconnectedness of gender with other inequalities like sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, nationality, class, age, religion/belief, disability, and gender identity, paying particular attention to the significance of this interconnectedness when analysing inequality impacts (Walby et al., 2012). The gender+ approach helps to

identify those policies which, while designed to counteract inequality, may also contribute to its reproduction (Lombardo et al., 2017), recognising 'that gender inequality and other inequalities are connected and are thus best addressed with those possible intersections in mind' (Verloo et al., 2011, p. 4). With this in mind, participants in the Open Studios were asked to apply a gender+ lens in the design of solutions to mitigate the negative effects of pandemic policy-making. The application of a gender+ lens also entailed ensuring the representation of marginalised voices in crisis policy-making by bringing it to the forefront of the research design. Representatives of marginalised groups were thus invited to the Open Studios to partake in the analyses and design of solutions that involved them.

The overarching aim of this chapter is to enhance the knowledge of the opportunities and challenges in applying design-thinking principles as part of a feminist collaborative research approach. We discuss the results from developing and applying the RESISTIRÉ Open Studio methodology drawing on earlier findings from previous research. In particular, we analyse how the design process and its application in the Open Studios relate to the Design Justice principles, to be explained further below. The chapter's two guiding questions are: how can design-thinking be employed in feminist collaborative research to develop practical solutions that address societal challenges identified through research findings? What opportunities and challenges does design-thinking present in and for feminist collaborative research and innovation projects?

The chapter begins with a review of insights on collaborative and design-thinking methodologies, providing the rationale for the development and application of the Open Studio methodology. Next, the Open Studio experience is described, after which we discuss the lessons learnt from implementing this methodology. The chapter concludes with reflective insights on the opportunities and challenges that design-thinking presents in/for feminist collaborative research and innovation.

Collaborative research and design-thinking methodologies – Opportunities and challenges for feminist research

The last few decades have seen an increasing interest in collaborative research methods involving non-academic stakeholders, such as when civil society organisations partner with a university to conduct research on the impact of their work on the target groups. It is argued that collaborative research may produce better results by tapping into practitioners' tacit knowledge, increase practitioners' ability to address complex societal problems, offer validation of

research results and, not least, produce research agendas that may assist in solving pressing societal challenges beyond the theoretical aims pursued by researchers in 'ivory towers'. Nielsen and Svensson encapsulate this process as 'carrying out research together with – not on – the participants' (2006, p. 4). Additionally, there is a fundamental belief that community members possess a strong interest and willingness to participate in, as well as valuable knowledge for, learning processes. Ellström and colleagues (2020) describe the collaborative research approach as characterised by 'recurrent interactions and joint learning activities between researchers and practitioners in commonly agreed-upon efforts to study change and innovation' (2020, p. 1520). An essential aspect of this process is building joint trust and respect for different types of expertise, while acknowledging privileges and power asymmetries among various practitioners. However, collaborative research has been criticised for the lack of research validity, the role of researchers (who must participate in a development process without becoming captive to it), power relations, ethics, balancing research and development needs, and the resource-intensive nature of such endeavours.

In the early 2000s, a special issue of *Gender, Work and Organization* called for gender researchers to 'move out of the armchair' to bridge the theory-practice divide by actively partaking in joint efforts with actors with the will to promote gender equality (Meyerson & Kolb, 2000). A wide range of collaborative research methodologies have been developed to meet this aspiration. These vary from more distanced approaches, entailing collaboration for only parts of the conducted research, to fully-fledged action research projects where researchers and practitioners work together not only to learn about existing gender-related inequalities but also to contribute to their transformation.

Collaborative feminist research approaches – Promoting reflexivity over action?

For the RESISTIRÉ project, several reasons underscore the importance of such approaches and have been an important rationale for conducting Open Studios. Collaboration within gender research has the potential to create more robust and democratic knowledge. It enhances the validity of both science itself and the scientific process by contextualising and incorporating the voices of marginalised groups, e.g., women and non-binary persons in the interpretation and production of science – a field traditionally dominated by men (Gunnarsson, 2006, 2007). Collaborative forms of feminist research can additionally function as a consciousness-raising tool (Gunnarsson, 2006). Collaborative feminist research serves to counteract the internalisation of oppression and personal blame,

shifting the focus towards what needs to change – e.g., broader societal forces that constrain individuals' lives and the connections between gender and other axes of oppression (Frisby et al., 2009). Collaborative feminist research approaches can also generate awareness and foster the critical reflexivity necessary to identify and reflect on gendered norms among participants who, in various ways, are themselves part of privileged groups. Another important reason is related to the complexity of designing and implementing gender equality interventions. Participants with practical experience in such initiatives possess crucial, albeit often tacit and non-formalised professional know-how. Collaborative approaches thus offer a means for research to tap into this valuable knowledge and utilise it for creating better change strategies (Callerstig & Lindholm, 2024).

From the above, it can be concluded that feminist collaborative approaches have several advantages for generating democratic knowledge and promoting the reflexivity necessary for integrating a gender+ perspective. However, several concerns and challenges have also been raised. Besides the overarching issues of validity and neutrality, mentioned in relation to mainstream collaborative approaches above, other shortcomings exist in relation to how actionable these approaches are in transforming inequalities. Ethical considerations, particularly regarding the beneficiaries of collaborative research approaches – i.e., how marginalised groups may benefit from collaborative research – have also been a focal point (Gunnarsson, 2006). Furthermore, collaborative research has tended to become ensnared in the quest for perfect, all-encompassing solutions, even though such solutions may be unattainable due to many gender equality problems being complex and 'wicked' (Weick, 1984) and has additionally been identified as time-consuming and costly (Ellström et al., 2020). It has proven challenging to generate tangible solutions, with the strong emphasis placed on contemplation and less on action. (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styrhe, 2008). Despite progress in advancing participatory and action-oriented feminist research approaches, a gap persists between research on existing gender inequalities, their causes and consequences, and the practical means to addressing them.

Design-thinking – Promoting action over reflexivity?

In recent years, methodologies grounded in design thinking, specifically human-centred design applications (as opposed to product-centred design), have emerged as a means to make collaborative initiatives focused on social challenges more actionable, including initiatives for gender equality (Brown & Wyatt, 2009; Boyer et al., 2011). Similar to other forms of collaborative research approaches, design thinking is a people-centred approach that involves a collective effort to

understand, experiment and act in addressing challenges. It departs from the needs of communities and the requirements and contexts of end-users, emphasising development together with, rather than for, those who will have a use for the solutions (Bazzano et al., 2023). Core concepts include empathy for users, a disciplined approach to prototyping for gaining insights and a tolerance for ambiguity, where failure is seen as a necessary part of learning through iteration (Kolko, 2015; Bazzano et al., 2023). Often, a structured process involving different steps or phases is employed to aid in the creation of ideas (Seidel & Fixson, 2013; Christensen et al., 2020). Design processes are characterised by 'designer' mindsets, practices and tools, incorporating concepts such as human-centredness (translating user needs into viable design solutions), co-creation, empathetic involvement, the elimination of the fear of failure, rapid prototyping, visualisation, iteration and experimentation (Christensen et al., 2020; Brown, 2008). The emphasis is on producing a large number of ideas for addressing typically wicked problems within a relatively short timeframe (Christensen et al., 2020; Strid & Denis, 2024).

General critiques of design-thinking approaches include: the argument that it is not truly 'new', the potential for privileging designer ideas over end-users, and the risk of reinforcing conservative or non-transformative solutions due to time constraints and a lack of reflexivity, with an overemphasis on finding quick solutions. Contrary to the critique towards feminist collaborative research, design-thinking – it has been argued – tends to prioritise action over contemplation. Furthermore, while the Human-Centred Design framework provides a meaningful structure for problem-solving for people, it falls short in addressing issues of equity comprehensively, leaving a literature gap (Bazzano et al., 2023). Similar to the discussion around the need for intersectional approaches in collaborative feminist research endeavours, design efforts have been problematised on similar accounts.

There are two main aspects to the challenges of design-thinking methodologies discussed in the literature. The first is the perpetuation of the status quo in design, where designers may focus on the quantitative majority and attempt to create a 'one-size-fits-all' solution that primarily benefits white, male, cisgender, able-bodied, neurotypical, heterosexual individuals with medium to high income (Bazzano et al., 2023). The second involves the misrepresentation of users, stemming from a lack of diversity on the design team and unchecked personal biases. This misrepresentation may lead to incorrect and stereotypical categorisations of marginalised users. This challenge is increased by uneven power dynamics between designers and users, techno-solutionism – the belief that technology alone can solve complex societal problems – and an

accountability deficit, where design teams may fail to consider the intentional and unintentional outcomes a solution may pose. Consequently, solutions may perpetuate and even amplify oppressive forces, contributing to harm against minoritised populations. In order to ensure designs for social good, to counteract the systemic oppression faced by different groups and to promote liberatory or emancipatory design, recent years have seen several attempts to create tools for their practical application (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation & Intentional Futures, 2020; Noel, 2016; Bazzano et al., 2023).

How then to solve the puzzle of balancing the need for reflexivity *and* action? Lessons from the literature discussed above show the negative consequences of placing too much emphasis on reflexivity which might hinder action, but also how too much focus on action might jeopardise the reflexivity needed to integrate a gender+ perspective to avoid the specific design-related challenges raised above. We suggest that one way to address these challenges when applying design-thinking in the framework of collaborative feminist research approaches (to achieve the dual aim of reflexivity and action) is to apply the principles of design justice, understood as:

> a field of theory and practice that is concerned with how the design of objects and systems influences the distribution of risks, harms, and benefits among various groups of people. Design justice focuses on the ways that design reproduces, is reproduced by, and/or challenges the matrix of domination (white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism). Design justice is also a growing social movement that aims to ensure a more equitable distribution of design's benefits and burdens; fair and meaningful participation in design decisions; and recognition of community-based design traditions, knowledge, and practices. (Costanza-Chock, 2018, p. 533)

In our analysis, we thus utilise design justice as a framework to critically reflect on the design process in the Open Studio methodology. More specifically, we focus on the questions relevant for the fulfilment of design justice principles; i.e., questions about the designer (who gets to design?), the beneficiaries, (who do we design for or with?), values (what values do we encode and reproduce in the objects and systems that we design?), scope (how do we scope and frame design problems?), sites (where do we do design, what design sites are privileged and what sites are ignored or marginalised, and how do we make design sites accessible to those who will be most impacted?), ownership, accountability, political economy (who owns and profits from design outcomes, what social relationships are reproduced by design, and how do we move towards community control of design processes?), and discourse (what stories do we tell about how things are designed?) (Costanza-Chock, 2018, p. 533).

By applying design justice principles, an intersectional perspective is anchored into the design process. This can (re)introduce 'friction' into the process (Christensen et al., 2020), through the questions it poses to designers and facilitators, yet we see this as an opportunity to promote the reflexivity designers need in collaborative feminist research approaches while still being able to produce actionable outcomes. In the Open Studio methodology, which applies an intersectional (gender+) perspective, two tools were particularly designed with this ambition in mind: the intersectional 'personas' and the 'better stories'. These will be discussed as part of the overall Open Studio experience and approach.

The Open Studio experience

As described above, the RESISTIRÉ project aimed to investigate, analyse and monitor the impact of COVID-19. The overarching goal was to turn the evidence from research findings into practical solutions for urgent, gendered emergencies created by the pandemic. The focus of both the empirical studies and solutions generated were the policy domains included in the EU Gender Equality Strategy and EU discrimination grounds. The project was conducted in three cycles, each generating new research results and employing a set of Open Studios transforming research results into practical solutions and outcomes (see Figure 2.2).

The project was conducted in three cycles, each generating new research results and employing a set of Open Studios transforming research results into practical solutions and outcomes.

The Open Studios originated from a need to analyse and process the extensive research results of the RESISTIRÉ project and utilise them to inspire actionable ideas for inclusive social interventions and insightful recommendations to various stakeholders (including policy-makers, civil society and employers). Due to the urgency inherent in the COVID-19 crisis, this transformation from research to practicable solutions had to be swiftly and effectively carried out. Simultaneously, it was imperative that this methodology was underpinned by an intersectional gender+ perspective and that the envisioned outputs were co-creatively designed with consortium partners and external experts. The Open Studio model was developed for use in the three cycles of the project based on these principles and taking inspiration from Boyer, Cook and Steinberg's (2011) concept. This strategic design model from the Helsinki Design Lab was constructed as an innovative way of digging deeper into complex societal issues by both deconstructing them to untangle and identify their root causes, and defining strategic avenues for potential positive change.

The Open Studios as used in RESISTIRÉ were held over the course of two full days each, as opposed to the duration of five full days as described in Boyer, Cook and Steinberg (2011). Moreover, they were organised in both online and in-person formats. It was decided that two days was the optimal duration that both allowed us to meet the requirements of the initial concept and ensure diverse participation, given the various participants' limited availability. On the first day, the sessions were organised around a process of divergence, where participants were encouraged to brainstorm about a number of issues and explore new ideas in an open way. This 'opening of the minds' was designed to elicit varied and creative responses that ultimately formed the basis for the subsequent day of activities. On the second day, the participants went through a process of convergence, which aimed to bring the different ideas of the previous day together in various ways to shape new concepts of potential solutions. Specific exercises, elaborated on below, were developed to facilitate these divergence and convergence processes, which are represented in the double diamond design model (Banathy, 2013). All in all, the set-up of the Open Studio largely mirrored that of the Helsinki Lab. The reason for conducting the Open Studios both online and in-person was mainly due to the limitations imposed on face-to-face interactions during the height of the pandemic, allowing the project a degree of flexibility to deal with health restrictions.

An overview of the consecutive (sometimes concurrent) steps that were carried out to plan and organise the Open Studios is provided in Figure 3.2. It outlines the methodology utilised by the Open Studios as well as the various sessions and tools that were developed and applied.

Figure 3.2: Open Studio development process

The design of the Open Studios

The first step of Open Studio development (which did not need to be repeated in subsequent cycles of the project) commenced with the creation of a concrete agenda for the two days, i.e., developing and planning the sessions and exercises to be used. Some of the sessions required specific tools, which were developed in a later stage of the process and whose content was related to the theme of an individual Open Studio. With little exception, this schedule (and

facilitation guideline) was implemented for all Open Studios organised as part of RESISTIRÉ. A summary of the schedule can be seen in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Open Studio general schedule

Session	Objective
Day 1	
00 – Miro tutorial *or* arrival of participants	Familiarise participants with the Miro board (if the OS is organised online) *or* receive the participants at the venue (if the OS is organised in person)
01 – Warmup	Introduce the Open Studio, its facilitators, and the participants
02 – Inspiration	Briefly present research findings and have participants critically assess the better stories (policy/societal responses)
03 – Empathy	Stimulate empathy and reflexivity through the personas, which reflect the needs and experiences of target vulnerable groups
04 – Brainstorm	Develop a first set of ideas/potential solutions using Lotus Blossoms
Day 2	
05 – Brainstorm	Recap from the first day and generate additional ideas by way of the ensuing discussion
06 – Co-create	First session dedicated to developing concrete ideas for action
07 – Co-create	Second session dedicated to developing concrete ideas for action
08 – Conclusions	Define priorities and follow-up actions based on the previously developed ideas

These guidelines, briefly detailed here, ensured qualitative consistency and smooth facilitation across all Open Studios. Depending on the format (in person or online), the first day began with either a short tutorial on how to use the online whiteboard Miro (used for presenting the prepared materials to the participants and for capturing their inputs) or with the arrival of participants to the venue. After the initial welcome by the facilitators, the first session provided an opportunity for participants to introduce themselves and get to know each other in terms of their personal background and professional life, as well as to share initial 'better stories' (explained in more detail below) that they themselves

had encountered. In the second and third sessions, participants worked through exercises that aimed to inspire them with the aid of better stories of existing initiatives and to stimulate their empathy and reflexivity through personas that reflected the experience of the target groups. The first day concluded with an idea-generating activity based on the 'Lotus Blossom' brainstorming concept. These tools are elaborated upon in more detail below. After the end of this day, the facilitation team compiled a logically structured mind map consisting of the various themes, sub-themes and topics that were brought up thus far.

The second day of the Open Studio opened with the participants critically responding to the mind map, adding new dimensions to be considered and gradually arriving at outlines for concrete action ideas. At the end of this process, a number of ideas were chosen for further development – turning ideas into better stories of societal and/or policy responses – and participants could select which ones they would like to help co-design in the sixth and seventh sessions. In the final session, the participants, including the facilitators, voted on the ideas that they deemed most suitable to be developed further, tested and launched after the Open Studio.

Choosing the themes of the Open Studio

Based on the project's research findings, an initial list of key themes and salient issues was identified. Each of these themes was described in relation to why it was proposed, a list of sub-themes or core issues, relevant target groups and the potential impact it could have in terms of policy and/or social innovation. Consortium members then provided comments and feedback and decided collaboratively which four themes would be the focus of the Open Studios in each cycle. An overview of all Open Studios that were organised during the project can be seen in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Overview of Open Studios

Theme	Online/ in Person	No. of Participants
Cycle 1 (September–October 2021)		
Improving support for healthcare workers	Online	24
Solutions for inclusive telework	Online	26
Solutions for inclusive access to green commons	Online	21
Transforming masculinity roles	Online	24

Table 3.2: Continued

Theme	Online/ in Person	No. of Participants
Cycle 2 (March–April 2022)		
Post-pandemic innovations to counter gender-based violence	Online	23
Young people in education during and beyond the pandemic	In person	17
Solutions for teachers in a post-pandemic world	Online	20
Gender-based digital violence and digital activism	Online	25
Cycle 3 (February–March 2023)		
Solutions for older people in a post-pandemic world	In person	18
Ecosystems of care: Inclusive and healing urban ecologies	In person	18
Creative civic responses to crises	Online	18
Inclusive digitalisation and bridging the digital divide	Online	20

Recruiting participants

Once the themes had been established, invitations were sent out (in consecutive rounds) to potential participants outside of the consortium. Care was taken to ensure a balance in the profiles of invited people, considering both geographical diversity – i.e., people from all over Europe – and variation in professional backgrounds. With regard to the latter, invitees (and eventual participants) included experts and researchers specialising in pertinent socioeconomic inequalities and/or the topic that is covered, representatives of relevant civil society organisations, activists, people with both a creative or artistic background and an interest in the topic, civil servants and policymakers. A pre-set target of eight external participants was often reached, though not always due to the relative unpredictability and difficulty in having people agree to join a two-day workshop. External participants were also paid a fee, recognising the time and effort that they invested in the Open Studio. The total number of participants per Open Studio usually involved between

seventeen and twenty-five people, including the facilitators and other consortium partners. All participants were sent briefing materials in advance which provided further information about the overall project, the co-creative Open Studio methodology, the insights gathered on the topic through RESISTIRÉ's research activities and the better stories. In this way, the participants were able to have clear expectations of what an Open Studio entails and what was expected of them.

Tools prepared for the Open Studios

Concurrent with the 'recruitment' process, the facilitation team prepared the specific tools and materials required for the various exercises of the Open Studio. In the following sections we focus on the better stories and personas as innovative tools while also briefly touching upon the Lotus Blossom tool due to its effectiveness in stimulating divergent thinking. In order to logically structure and frame the eight different sessions and the necessary tools to carry them out, as well as capture the participants' ideas and outputs, either a digital whiteboard using Miro or physical posters were designed, depending on the format used.

Better stories were developed on the basis of the project's research results and additional desk research, for use in the second session. These are inspirational stories that highlight a concrete way in which a negative situation can be improved, without resorting to 'best practices' that might very well be impossible to achieve in all or most practical settings. A standardised format was used for the Open Studio to provide a description of the better stories, with all the key elements including an indication of the context in which they were carried out, and the relevant actors.

Personas – archetypes of people that were (in this case) affected by the pandemic and the resulting policy measures – were prepared for the third session in order to evoke empathy. They were based on the insights gleaned from the research, more specifically the collected narratives, and allowed the participants to take a step back from their own experiences. Each persona contained a description of the life of a person, as well as relevant characteristics linked to socioeconomic inequalities (Denis & Strid, 2024). Both the personas and better stories are covered in more detail below.

Lotus Blossoms were designed to motivate productive brainstorming processes among the participants and used in the last session of the first day. An idea, issue, or question to be discussed was prepared beforehand (based on the research) and situated in the centre of a poster, and participants were

requested to develop eight relevant ideas/solutions that could be placed around this initial 'challenge'. Each of these eight ideas could then form the centre of its own 'Lotus', enabling the development of eight additional ideas that complemented the initial concept. In most cases, the Lotus Blossom questions were adapted, further informed and/or complemented based on the various observations of the participants during the sessions involving better stories and personas. These observations often offered additional but essential layers of complexity to the issues at hand, i.e., integrating a more intersectional perspective into the discussions.

Constructing and using intersectional personas in the Open Studios

Personas are often used in design-thinking endeavours, crafted from data about anticipated users. Personas are archetypes used to visualise the expectations, experiences, and needs of different user groups (Pruitt & Grudin, 2003). Their purpose is to bridge the gap between designers and the intended users (i.e., to connect designers to their users), making data more tangible and presenting 'user' identities, in our case the beneficiaries of initiatives to promote gender+ intersectional equality within the pandemic context. Personas thus help designers understand 'users' and their perspectives. To comprehend or depict individuals accurately using personas, it is essential to consider the complex interplay of multiple identities and the context in which they operate for a comprehensive representation and to prevent personas from becoming superficial and reinforcing stereotypes (Marsden & Pröbster, 2019).

In the longer run, personas may guide design decisions to better meet the needs of the considered end-users. Personas offer the designer a possibility to 'engage' with the people for whom they are designing by providing a fictional character. But in constructing personas and designing different objects based on personas, there is also the risk of reproducing stereotypical understandings of particular user groups in ways that may 'steer' the behaviour of the users. Turner and Turner (2011) note that design inscribes cultural values and notions of ideal users. Such values in turn prescribe and shape everyday activities and expectations based on these assumptions. The methods used to create personas might be gender-biased, for example, in terms of the questions that are asked, or the images that are used (Hill et al., 2017).

In the Open Studios, the personas were designed using the results from narratives from marginalised groups collected in the project (see Denis & Strid, 2024). These were constructed to represent lived experiences in relation

to the particular theme guiding the respective Open Studio. An example of a persona used in the Open Studio titled 'Solutions for Older People in a Post-pandemic World' is illustrated in Figure 3.3 below.

The constructed personas aimed to: (a) cultivate reflexivity concerning how societal norms impacting on marginalised individuals influence their unique experiences and opportunities for action; (b) bring attention to privileges and create empathy towards the disadvantages experienced by various (marginalised) groups in comparison to others; (c) encourage self-reflection among Open Studio participants. The goal was to foster an understanding of the interconnected and dynamic nature of how and why individuals perceive and respond to the inequalities they encounter.

Figure 3.3: Example of a persona

Constructing and using better stories in the Open Studios

Within RESISTIRÉ, we borrowed Dina Georgis' concept of the 'better story' to highlight promising practices that contribute to advancing greater equality within specific contexts (Georgis, 2013). In this project, better stories referred to inspiring examples of promoting equality within the specific context of the

pandemic. The use of better stories is not to find a universal 'perfect fix', but rather an invitation to identify, highlight and learn from others. It also serves as an invitation to envision even more compelling narratives that can be further developed. This approach involves paying attention to shared experiences, as well as acknowledging the hopes, dreams and visions that contribute to imagining better futures (Georgis, 2013, p. 9). The utilisation of the 'better stories' concept perceives marginalised individuals as engaged subjects drawing upon resources from their everyday lives (Georgis, 2013). This form of agency is always exercised within the context of social relations, which can either facilitate or constrain one's actions.

In the Open Studios, participants were prompted to reflect on 'better stories' on multiple occasions. Initially, they were encouraged to share their own narratives of navigating the pandemic. Subsequently, they engaged in reviewing examples of collected initiatives and, finally, they participated in designing their own initiatives. Guiding questions used were: what have been some inspiring practices, initiatives, policies of responding to this crisis that we all share, but are not equally affected by? How can a gender+ perspective help us explore, make visible and co-create more egalitarian, more inclusive policies, initiatives, and practices?

In the Open Studio context, the concept of the 'better story' was construed as a dual-purpose asset – serving both as an emotional resource for learning and as a reflective instrument for contemplating the positioning of oneself and others in the pursuit of equality. This notion prompted us to reflect upon 'silences' (who and what is not represented) and consider lives that do not neatly align with what is commonly understood as resistance and emancipation. Furthermore, it provided insights into lived experiences of marginalised groups that challenge the deficit-model lens and showed how individuals can be resourceful in adverse times despite facing continuous structural disadvantage.

Better stories thus serve as both a guiding principle for how gender+ can be practically translated into co-creative elements in research projects and a tool for actively constructing learning examples, where the participants themselves are also contributing to constructing new and better stories. In the Open Studio, the participants were presented with a number of existing social and policy responses. They were asked to reflect upon them using questions to create reflexivity on the intersectional nature of inequalities and how they could be improved, such as: what makes the policy/societal initiative a positive one? What or who is missing? Which aspects of the policy/societal initiative could be improved? In the co-creative sessions where new responses were developed, participants were again asked to reflect upon what and who may be still missing,

emphasising the open-ended process of intersectional reflexivity and learning processes (Kumashiro, 2000).

Facilitating the Open Studios

To ensure that an Open Studio proceeded smoothly, the facilitation team prepared by assigning clearly set roles beforehand: two main facilitators introduced the Open Studio, moderated the proceedings of plenary sessions and observed the work that took place in the smaller groups whenever the complete group was divided into separate (breakout) rooms. Three to four 'small group facilitators' guided the discussions in working groups, preventing the participants from going off-topic and keeping an eye on the allocated time. Since all facilitators were previously involved in the development of the various materials in the preceding months, they were well-informed on the topic that was being addressed. While the Open Studios were organised in both online and in-person formats, these implied only a few relatively minor differences in terms of their preparation and facilitation (i.e., physical posters instead of a Miro board).

Processing the results of the Open Studios

After the conclusion of each Open Studio, the results were processed further. This meant that every idea that was developed in the sixth and seventh sessions was written out in detail by the facilitators that presided over their development. Utilising a democratic decision-making process once more, the consortium came to an agreement in each cycle over which ideas to further pursue, test and implement, whether in the form of operational recommendations, concepts for pilot projects or ideas for a future research agenda.

The twelve Open Studios generated a total of seventy-six distinct and actionable ideas, which were subsequently refined within the RESISTIRÉ project. These ideas formed the basis for diverse pilot initiatives, contributed to shaping the project's research agendas and served as inspiration for developing factsheets containing operational recommendations. In total, nine pilot actions, twenty-one operational recommendations, and sixteen research agendas were developed.[1]

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1   For a full account of the action ideas (see Kerremans et al., 2021; Kerremans & Denis, 2022; Kerremans & Denis, 2023), and the RESISTIRÉ Community on Zenodo.

Lessons learnt

In this section, we return to the overall questions posed in the chapter: how can design-thinking be employed in feminist collaborative research to develop practical solutions that address societal challenges identified through research findings? What potential and limitations does design-thinking present in/for feminist collaborative research projects?

As discussed above, one of the major challenges in feminist collaborative research is the tendency to emphasise contemplation over action. On the other hand, while design-thinking – originating from mainstream and often gender-blind contexts – is a potential valuable complement to make feminist collaborative research more actionable, it has been found to pose a number of challenges on its own, as discussed earlier.

In this chapter, we suggest that one way to address the challenges highlighted in previous research when applying design-thinking in the framework of collaborative feminist research approaches is to apply the principles of Design Justice. This allows for the design process to consider the privileges of designers and reflect upon implicit biases that might otherwise impose and reproduce inequalities in the design process. Below, we discuss the main questions to assess how 'just' a design process is in relation to equity in design efforts, values, sites, ownership, and accountability (Costanza-Chock, 2018).

Equity in and from design efforts

This section relates to the questions posed in Design Justice regarding who gets to design and who we design for or with. The designers in the RESISTIRÉ project were a combination of team members of the consortium, mainly researchers, a diversity of stakeholders and members of the actual target group or beneficiaries. The research prior to the Open Studios was conducted by a cross-national and cross-cultural, multidisciplinary community of experts and researchers in gender and intersectional inequalities working collaboratively across the project, providing research insights and important data which reflected the experiences of the users. This formed the basis for the overall design of the Open Studios, including the development of tools. This lens was also applied in the selection and recruitment of participants to ensure as much diversity as possible since they were to be co-designers of the ideas and solutions. A choice made to stimulate creativity was to include one creative profile among the invited participants. This role encompassed artists, architects, and designers, who had a personal link, or an activity (partly) related to the theme of the Open Studio.

As reported above, various stakeholders were selected to capture different perspectives and contribute their experience and/or expertise in relation to the theme of the Open Studio, respecting geographical and cultural diversity. This included beneficiaries represented either directly or through their representatives in civil society, as explained below under 'Challenges'. Another technique used to ensure the 'presence' of the beneficiaries were the personas and the better stories – as reflections of users' lived experiences collected during the research phase through narratives that aimed to equalise the relationship between the researcher and the researched. In a way, these tools also brought the marginalised groups to the design table through their stories, affecting how participants felt, thought, and developed ideas.

Challenges: One of the key challenges was the recruitment of participants from marginalised communities, since some profiles of external participants were easier to recruit than others. Recruiting policy-makers and members of the target group (beneficiaries) proved the most challenging. In some instances, beneficiaries were part of the invited participants, especially when the theme of the Open Studio was linked to a specific community (such as young people and older people). For beneficiaries like victims of gender-based violence or caregivers, we involved activists working actively with the target group and/or members themselves of the target group.

Values and framing

In this section we return to the question posed in Design Justice of what values we reproduce in what we design and how we frame design problems. The values reflected in the Open Studios emanated from three sources: feminism, design, and the RESISTIRÉ project itself. With regard to feminist values and practices, consortium partners – including the facilitation team contributing towards the design of the Open Studios – continuously reflected upon their positioning in the interlocking systems of oppression (Collins, 2002), identifying their privileges and disadvantages. They also discussed, debated, and decided together which topics and grounds of inequality would be the focus of the various activities and exercises taking place in the Open Studios. Thus, self-awareness, self-reflection and reflexivity were key values enacted through the Open Studios. In the Open Studios, all sessions where design problems were framed and solutions were proposed ended with an additional question: who are we missing, whose needs and experiences are not yet included?

In relation to design, the most relevant value enacted in the Open Studios was empathy through the personas and better stories that provided a diversity

of lived experiences during the pandemic and allowed for privileges and advantages to emerge in thoughts, ideas and solutions of the participants.

In relation to the project itself, the values were more linked to the pandemic and the context in which the project took place. They included care for vulnerable groups, for each other and for oneself, and a focus on the impact of policies and choices made by policy-makers (to help reduce increasing inequalities). These values influenced the design of the Open Studios. With a model structured to cover processes of both divergence and convergence during the two days, the overall approach was to facilitate the co-creation process, creating a space where all participants were valued for their input and expertise, thus sharing power with participants. Creating and valorising empathy in the co-creation process was explicit with the use of personas in support. The importance of caring was translated in the strict adherence to the timing and the introduction of qigong as an optional re-energising activity for all participants that enabled physical movement and care.

Challenges: the design choices made were compatible with the abovementioned values but could never be perfect. This relates back to the underpinning idea of the better stories concept that there is no perfect fix to societal injustices and that improvements can always be made (Georgis, 2013), which was conveyed to the participants. The overall timing tried to be inclusive of the personal situation and needs of diverse participants, but the requirement to be engaged from nine in the morning to five in the afternoon on both days excluded some participants. For online Open Studios, having participants from three different time zones exacerbated this potential exclusion.

The Open Studios are a step in a process from research towards innovation. The research results played an essential role in defining the objectives and thematic focus of each of the individual Open Studios. The speed at which the research had to be performed meant that research activities had to run in parallel instead of in consecutive steps (see Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion). One of the 'advantages' of this situation is that the decision-making process included all researchers and was completely open to all input. The diversity of profiles and disciplines in the research team could play its full potential in this process. The limitations were that, even if open and democratic, the choices made in terms of thematic focus were always susceptible to being influenced by individuals exerting power. Additionally, the time pressure may have also led to the exclusion of voices.

Sites

The Open Studios took place both online and in person, entailing advantages and disadvantages. Reflecting from a design justice perspective, the online format facilitated a wider representation of participants, as some people might not have been able to travel and/or found it easier to connect and contribute online. The in-person Open Studios took place in convenient venues across consortium partner locations which enabled capitalising on local contacts. In this way, we managed to get a wide range of representatives who were the most impacted in relation to the theme of the Open Studio, reducing overall travel time and the environmental impact of travel.

For both formats, risks associated with technology were avoided, as they were designed to be human-centred. Examples of this human-centredness are the strict adherence to the agreed-upon timing, the flexibility to allow for other personal obligations during the day, and the attention to participants' well-being with the introduction of voluntary qigong sessions each day.

Challenges: complete avoidance of digital technologies was not possible for online Open Studios, as two IT tools were used, i.e., an online whiteboard (Miro) as a joint workspace and the online videoconferencing application Zoom as a tool to communicate and interact. At the start of the project, all participants were used to online video meetings, but most participants did not have experience with online whiteboards. A first warm-up exercise was therefore used to get to know each other and, at the same time, to test basic functionalities of Miro (how to navigate the board and how to write and edit sticky notes). Over time, more participants, particularly from the consortium, became more fluent with the tool. Invited participants who did not have any experience with Miro were asked to join fifteen minutes early to attend a brief tutorial. If a participant faced issues during the start of the Open Studio, one of the co-facilitators would go to a separate Zoom breakout room with this person to ensure that they could use the required basic functionalities. For the in-person Open Studios, the choice of sites was a limitation. It was not motivated by the selected theme, but by other criteria, i.e., the presence of a project partner, access to a facility adapted to the Open Studio format and an easy-to-reach venue. Considering the particular themes that were chosen, the hypothesis is that this had little impact from a design justice perspective.

Ownership and accountability

This section refers to the question posed within Design Justice on who 'owns' design outcomes and who gets credit from design. When considering the outcomes

of this (or any other) design-oriented effort, there can be valid concerns as to who ultimately 'owns' them and benefits from them. Ideas for social innovations and policy recommendations that resulted from the Open Studios were made available publicly through the related reports that were released on the online open-access repository Zenodo (see the RESISTIRÉ Community on zenodo. org). Moreover, the project was aware of many concrete beneficiaries in practice. Target groups of the project were reached through the operationalisation of selected concepts, with some ideas for action being transformed into fully-fledged social innovations and implemented in specific social and geographical contexts in a further stage. The Open Studios led to nine concrete pilot projects which were real-life interventions that benefited various marginalised groups across different European regions and cities (see Chapter 4). They became a starting point for enacting change in local communities and contributed towards addressing inequalities of marginalised groups caused or exacerbated by the pandemic. Furthermore, the diverse participants to the Open Studios were often inspired by the resulting ideas and were able to share the proposed actions with their own organisations and networks.

Challenges: despite the open availability of the co-created and innovative ideas for action and despite the project's outreach to various stakeholders, many potential beneficiaries might remain in the dark about their existence. On the other hand, social innovators who were aware of and inspired by these ideas might not have sufficient resources to implement them. This includes material resources but also points to the need for capacity-building, since potential innovators might not have the expertise, skills and/or know-how to carry out the inspiring ideas.

Conclusions and reflections

A contribution, or innovation, through the development of the Open Studios within the RESISTIRÉ project is that it merged aspects of feminist collaborative research and design-thinking with the specific aim of integrating an intersectional gender+ perspective into the process of using findings from gender research to develop initiatives that counteract existing gender inequalities.

In this final section we will reflect upon the results and what we see as potential future applications.

Design-thinking as a way to make feminist collaborative research more actionable

While the past few decades have witnessed a surge in studies focusing on interventions to tackle gender inequalities across various policy domains (Engeli & Mazur, 2018), there remains a scarcity of evidence on 'what works', in terms of their design and implementation, and the 'recipe for gender equality' continues to elude us, i.e., we still lack important knowledge on how to design effective initiatives to promote gender equality (Bustelo & Mazur, 2023). Despite progress, such as the emergence of participatory and action-oriented feminist research approaches, a gap persists between research on existing gender inequalities, their causes and consequences, and the practical means to address them. We believe that using the design thinking methodology is a way to avoid what has been referred to as the decision-making rationality dilemma (Brunsson, 1985) – i.e., to spend too much time on contemplation and finding 'perfect solutions', which has proven to be difficult given the complex and 'wicked' nature of societal problems (Weick, 1984; Brunsson, 1985; Callerstig, 2014). Instead, design-thinking allows for 'action rationality' (Brunsson, 1985), encompassing small steps in addressing complex societal problems and a trial-and-error approach in so doing. This is also the essence of the better stories approach, where equality is seen as a continuum rather than a fixed point – i.e., there can always be a better story. In applying design thinking, particular problems are addressed in a certain context and time, creating solutions to take one step forward but still recognising that additional and complementary steps are likely to be needed in the future.

Design justice to make design-thinking more reflexive towards a gender+ perspective

Bringing together feminist collaborative research and design-thinking, we identify common values and starting points in sharing power with participants and listening carefully to their voices, but also spot the tensions between those voices. While feminist collaborative research may overemphasise 'thinking' and reflection as well as digging deeper into understandings and experiences of the marginalised and oppressed, design-thinking may overemphasise 'doing', i.e., identifying solutions at a quick pace that might not allow for intersectional inequalities to be fully considered. We identified this tension in our project as well within the Open Studio methodology and through the Design Justice lens we recognised strengths, challenges, and potential mitigation strategies. We believe that the questions posed by Design Justice allow for the design process to become better aligned with the aims and opportunities of feminist collaborative

research, i.e., generating democratic knowledge and promoting reflexivity necessary for integrating a gender+ perspective; contextualising and incorporating the voices of marginalised groups; and counteracting the internalisation of oppression and personal blame as well as shifting the attention to what can and needs to be changed.

Future developments and applications

We believe that the Open Studio represents a fruitful methodology to co-create ideas, responses, and solutions to pressing social challenges for several reasons discussed above. To turn the question around, one may however ask – what is the better story of the Open Studio? In one of the final events of the RESISTIRÉ project, we gathered the project partners and external stakeholders to ask how the methodology of the Open Studio could be further developed. Two key points were raised which are particularly pertinent to our discussion here. The first concern revolves around making the personas intersectional. Personas can be perceived in some cases as reinforcing stereotypes, but even so they provide the space for a critical analysis of reality, with the ultimate aim of challenging biases and addressing inequalities.

One consideration is deciding which intersectional identities should be emphasised and which ones should be omitted. Another consideration is how to visually represent a person without perpetuating stereotypes, as illustrated in the earlier discussion on gender bias in the use of personas. In the Open Studios, the personas were left somewhat vague, and participants were asked to use their imagination to fill in the missing pieces and create more details around the person, thinking that they were designing solutions for that person.

The second point that we see as important for future developments relates to the first one: how to introduce even more friction in the Open Studio to avoid a simplistic 'win-win' thinking when designing solutions? This point recognises that there are always advantages and disadvantages to the solutions made and that the target group envisioned for the solutions developed may be vulnerable in one sense but privileged in another, and that in some cases there are 'winners and losers' with a particular solution. This also relates back to the better story approach where, as discussed earlier, it is important to recognise that there is no such thing as a perfect fix. In the practical application of the Open Studio, several creative suggestions were made to introduce friction and ask 'the other question' (as proposed in intersectional approaches, cf. Matsuda, 1991), such as using a set of question cards bringing in critical questions to use in the co-creative sessions.

As with the question of how to make better personas, we believe that this aspect can also be further developed in future applications of the methodology.

While we see the need to continue to make the Open Studio into an even better story, it is our firm belief that collaborative and design-inspired feminist research approaches have the potential to make a real difference in people's lives, while also contributing to important knowledge on how to achieve the transformation toward a more equal society.

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Alain Denis, Claudia Aglietti and Elena Ghidoni

Prototyping and testing social innovations to reduce gender+ inequalities: Lessons learnt from the nine pilot projects implemented through RESISTIRÉ

Introduction

Findings from the RESISTIRÉ project show that social innovations to reduce gender+ inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery phase came in most cases directly from civil society organisations (CSOs), as bottom-up initiatives in response to collective needs. CSOs are united by a common vision of inclusion and solidarity that extends to people who experience poverty and vulnerability and whose voices and needs have been systematically marginalised (Millard & Fucci, 2023). The role of civil society was fundamental in stimulating and increasing community resilience (Cibin et al., 2023), defined as '[...] the ability of community members to take meaningful, conscious, collective action to remedy the effects of a problem, mitigate future events, and even grow out of crises' (Isetti et al., 2022, p. 2). In many cases, CSOs were able to respond to the crisis faster than the authorities (Pazderski et al., 2022), not only in Europe but elsewhere in the world (e.g., Cai et al., 2021; Razavi et al., 2022). While CSOs themselves faced challenges that threatened their activities and survival, many new initiatives and innovations in their methods emerged, for example through greater use of digital tools, building stronger links with other organisations (Pazderski et al., 2022), or through strengthening existing networks of solidarity and support, as well as the emergence of new circuits of care (Razavi et al., 2022) that offered support to people in difficult situations.

Inspired by the capacity of civil society to create social innovations and encourage local authorities and civil society organisations to take action to reduce inequalities, RESISTIRÉ prototyped and piloted seven social innovations oriented to mitigate gender+ inequalities, which attracted nine organisations from civil society with different expertise and experience. This chapter overviews the process of development of these social innovations, from potential ideas to pilot action, and provides insights on the barriers and drivers that the different projects experienced along their implementation, along with lessons learnt for

making social innovations sustainable and incorporate a gender and intersectional perspective in their design, implementation, and evaluation.

The chapter is structured as follows. After this introduction, the next section engages with the concept of social innovation that guided the overall design of innovations in RESISTIRÉ. The section then moves on to explore the original process of the Open Studio, a space where the research findings from the project are shared among a variety of actors and become the basis to co-create innovative solutions. The following section introduces the nine projects piloted, with an emphasis on their link to the pandemic, the innovation they proposed, and the extent to which each project successfully achieved its objectives. In the following section, barriers and drivers of social innovation will be looked at in depth, among the ones that emerged across the pilot projects. These levers are considered essential for social innovation to bring about change in women's well-being and empowerment. The chapter concludes with an overview of the main lessons learnt from the social innovations piloted in RESISTIRÉ, emphasising the contribution of research in designing innovations aimed at challenging gender+ inequalities, and some reflections on the steps to be taken in future projects.

Designing social innovations with a gender+ perspective

This section presents the context in which RESISTIRÉ worked to prototype and pilot social innovations to reduce intersectional inequalities that emerged or were exacerbated during the pandemic crisis and its aftermath. The first part introduces the concept of social innovation that inspired the design of the pilot interventions, from the perspective of community empowerment to address the unmet needs of vulnerable groups. The second part outlines the process of developing a set of social innovation actions into calls for pilot projects under the RESISTIRÉ framework, targeting civil society organisations (CSOs) as agents of change. It concludes with an overview of the nine pilot actions implemented in Europe, which serves only as an introduction to the more detailed description of each project that follows.

Social innovation to address gender+ inequalities

Defining the meaning of social innovation is a complex task, given the long historical trajectory of this concept, its evolution and the different contexts and projects in which it is realised in practice. Already developed in the work of the economist Schumpeter and the sociologist Ogburn, among others, the concept of social innovation has gained momentum at the beginning of the 21st century

(Van Der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016; Phills et al., 2008), with a growing interest in addressing broad societal challenges beyond technological and profit-oriented innovation projects. Depending on the disciplinary focus from which social innovation is studied, different aspects are prioritised, with economic and sociological perspectives being the two most important. For example, Aksoy and colleagues (2019, p. 432) describe social innovation as 'the creation of new, scalable and sustainable market-based service offerings that solve systemic societal problems'. Phills and colleagues (2008), on the other hand, emphasise that social innovation does not focus solely on the pursuit of economic or technological goals, but rather seeks to respond to social problems and improve people's quality of life by generating positive social impacts. Nicholls (2010, p. 3) points out that the concept is characterised as 'a process of social change involving the creation of new relationships, collaborations, and organisational forms with the aim of improving the quality of life of individuals and communities'. Other authors highlight the role of politics in promoting social innovation, defining it as '(...) participatory public leadership that generates new solutions (services, products, processes and models) aimed at solving social needs (more effectively than traditional solutions) and that simultaneously lead to a change in social relations and the generation of public value' (Conejero Paz & Redondo Lebrero, 2016, p. 26).

Social innovation is a dynamic process to address complex social problems, where the effectiveness of such a process derives from the collaboration of different actors (Moulaert et al., 2013). The different actors involved may have social values that run counter to the logic of the market and are rather oriented towards satisfying unmet human needs that are not (or not satisfactorily) met by the private sector (market mechanisms) or the public sector. Social innovation can therefore be guided by certain values that go beyond the logic of productivity and competitiveness, giving priority instead to social inclusion, quality of life, equality and diversity, solidarity, civic participation, respect for the environment, health, education, and the efficiency of public services. From this perspective, the specificity of social innovation compared to other types of innovation is that it is social both in its ends and in its means. It simultaneously satisfies social needs and creates new social relationships or collaborations, thereby enhancing society's capacity to act (Murray et al., 2010, p. 4). Given the complexity of the COVID-19 outbreak and related economic, political, and social crises, there has been increased interest and research on social innovation as a tool to address these emerging challenges (Montgomery & Mazzei, 2021). The cross-dimensional and inclusive nature of social innovation makes it ideally suited as a mainstream resilience tool (Millard & Fucci, 2023). At the same time, knowledge gaps in understanding the transformative nature of initiatives at the

local level may prevent social innovation from reaching its potential elsewhere, and opportunities for replication and scale-up may be lost. There is therefore a need to understand and disseminate initiatives, their barriers, and their drivers, considering the wider ecosystems that can generate and sustain different social innovations over time (OECD, 2021).

Translating insights into prototypes for social innovation

The starting point for the development of social innovations was data on inequalities across the EU, collected and analysed from a gender+ perspective. The research findings gathered in the thirty countries covered by the project were further analysed with a view to translating them into operational solutions capable of filling the identified gaps in terms of social needs, especially those arising from the pandemic crisis. This was made possible by the Open Studio approach (Boyer et al., 2011), a process based on a co-creation and participatory methodology consisting of action-oriented analysis where researchers and civil society stakeholders work together to identify innovative policy and operational solutions (Kerremans et al., 2021; Kerremans & Denis, 2022b) (see Figure 4.1).
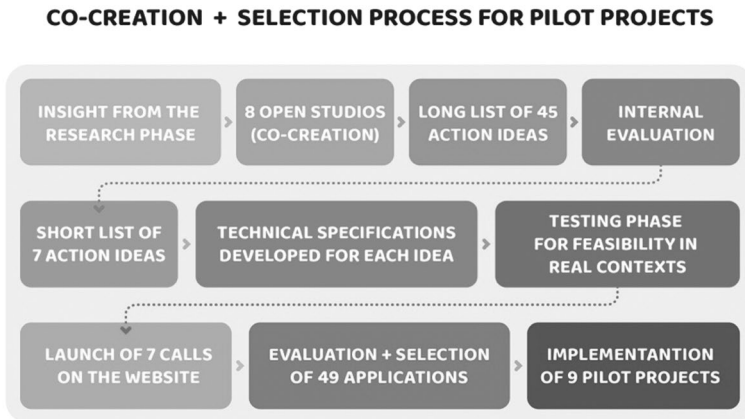
Figure 4.1: Visual representation of the design and selection process of pilot projects.
Source: The authors' own elaboration

The Open Studios generated a long list of action ideas, which were further evaluated internally by the RESISTIRÉ partners to select those with the highest potential and suitability to be transformed into pilot project concepts, as they met the

following criteria: innovation, capacity to mitigate gender+ inequalities, potential to attract the attention and awareness of the stakeholders involved, practical feasibility (Živković et al., 2021; Kerremans & Denis, 2022a; See Chapter 4 for a description of the Open Studio approach). Once identified, the seven selected concepts were each further developed into project technical specifications, primarily targeted at CSOs but designed in such a way that their implementation would require the cooperation of different actors to achieve the desired process and outcomes (Moulaert et al., 2013).

These technical specifications were then subjected to a testing phase with relevant stakeholders, namely CSOs, experts, municipalities and private entities that could potentially be part of the implementation process. The aim of the testing phase was to ensure that the selected pilot projects were feasible in terms of scope, timeframe, and budget. The technical specifications were tested with at least one (and in some cases up to three) organisations, whose feedback and comments were then incorporated into the seven guidelines for applicants (Živković et al., 2021; Kerremans & Denis, 2022). Once the testing phase was completed and the proposals had reached consensus among the stakeholders involved, the calls for the implementation of the pilot projects were launched and advertised on the project website and through the project's media.

Following the launch of the seven calls for pilot projects, RESISTIRÉ internal selection panels were set up to evaluate the proposals received. Two phases were foreseen for this purpose. Phase 1 consisted of evaluating the application forms based on an evaluation grid. The jury members from the RESISTIRÉ team were asked to make both a quantitative and a qualitative assessment. The quantitative assessment consisted of a score for each of the following criteria: (1) Strength of alignment with the RESISTIRÉ objectives and conceptual framework; (2) Strength of alignment with the pilot's objectives; (3) Consistency with expected outcomes; (4) Likelihood of the pilot leading to innovation; (5) Likelihood of the pilot leading to scalability and replicability; (6) Justification of the proposed budget; and (7) Previous experience of the applicant. The qualitative assessment consisted of highlighting the main strengths and weaknesses of the application, which would be discussed with the shortlisted applicants in the following phase. In the final evaluation, each panel member indicated whether the proposal should be short-listed or not. The scores given by each panel member were added together and then averaged. The proposals with the highest overall scores in phase one were selected and advanced to the next selection phase. If two or more applicants received the same score, the applicants with the highest score for criterion (a) 'Strength of alignment with the objectives and conceptual framework of RESISTIRÉ' were given priority on the shortlist. Phase two consisted of a

question-and-answer session where the shortlisted applicants were asked to pro-
vide a summary of their proposal. Specific questions were then asked, based on
the qualitative assessment carried out in phase one and previously agreed by the
four partners involved in this task. These were followed by common questions
necessary to make comparisons between proposals on specific aspects. Appli-
cants could also put questions to the jury. At the end of this selection process, a
total of nine organisations received funding to carry out the pilot projects (two
pilot projects were carried out by two different organisations).

In terms of timing, the development of the solution ideas and the launch of
the calls for pilot projects took place on two different occasions during the pro-
ject, once in the first cycle and once in the second cycle.

In the first round, three calls were launched, and four proposals were imple-
mented between February and October 2022. In the second round, four calls
were launched, and five organisations received funding to implement their proj-
ects between October 2022 and May 2023. The following figure (Figure 4.2)
shows the geographical distribution of the pilot projects and the cycle to which
they belong.

Figure 4.2: Geographical distribution of pilot projects in the first cycle (2021) and
second cycle (2022)

Source: The authors' elaboration based on the results of the selection process

The review of the social innovations prototyped

The following sections describe each pilot project, including its link to the pandemic emerging inequalities, the profile of the implementing organisations, the main outcomes achieved compared to what was promised at the outset, and some barriers they faced during the implementation.

Employers who care

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of care workers and the need to improve working conditions, combat precariousness and ensure decent wages. However, most of the attention during the pandemic has focused on the institutionalised health sector, neglecting the most marginalised and vulnerable domestic workers, i.e. those working in private households. Following the outbreak of the pandemic, many domestic workers lost their jobs and were left without legal protection or access to unemployment benefits; restrictions on mobility forced many live-in workers to be confined to the employer's home. In other cases, live-in domestic workers who lost their jobs ended up on the streets. Recognising that the transformation of the home care sector is a challenge that involves a wide range of different actors, such as public administration, civil society organisations, trade unions and domestic workers themselves, RESISTIRÉ has sought to introduce an innovative project that focuses on employers – individuals and families – as key actors for change. While many actions in the field are directed at empowering domestic workers alone, the primary aim and innovative aspect of this pilot was the idea to mobilise employers (individuals and families) on the importance of acting as allies, raising their awareness of domestic workers' rights, circumstances, and needs. The project was implemented from March to November 2022 by SOS Racismo Gipuzkoa, an organisation based in Renteria, in the Basque Country. At the heart of the project were joint working sessions between domestic workers and employers to promote their open and safe dialogue on several issues related to working conditions: job search; recruitment; employment relationship; termination of employment. The sessions aimed to produce a list of joint proposals for improving the sector, which SOS Racismo Gipuzkoa promoted in a subsequent advocacy phase with local and regional institutions. The project was successful in creating a safe space for dialogue between domestic workers and employers. It has shown how two potentially conflicting parties can recognise and empathise with each other by being able to express difficulties and needs directly, in a quiet space, in a dedicated environment. The advocacy phase was also fruitful. Renteria City Council agreed to involve SOS Racismo and to include some of the project's elements in a public awareness campaign on decent

domestic work. Moreover, the city council set up a public service that provides information and counselling to both care-receivers and care workers (Etxeko-lan, in Basque), in line with one of the recommendations formulated by SOS Racismo as an outcome of the project. In addition, SOS Racismo, together with University of Deusto, the University of the Basque Country and a regional development organisation, has been awarded funding to develop a prototype and test a public service matching job offering and demand, with a focus on guaranteeing the rights of both care-receivers and care providers. This would complement the services offered by the public counselling office. On the other hand, the main difficulty encountered by SOS Racismo in implementing the project has been to achieve significant and continuous participation in the project's activities in general and in the joint working sessions, both by individuals – employers and domestic workers – and by associations representing them.

Green spaces as ecosystems of care

Green spaces are essential to the wellbeing of those living in residential communities, and the COVID-19 crisis has further highlighted the urgent need of these spaces to mitigate social and health challenges (Davies & Sanesi, 2022). Yet, access to them is conditioned by multiple intersecting inequality factors, such as gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity, which the pandemic further exacerbated. A green space consists of 'hardware' – the green space itself and all its structures including public furniture, sports facilities, etc – but also of 'software', which represents the different ways in which the space is used. This innovative project idea puts the focus on the software side of green spaces, more specifically the programming of the use of the different areas of the space, of the different infrastructures available, the timing of the use and who is using the space. By focusing on the software side, different programmes could be implemented and adapted in a participatory way, considering the needs of all and especially of vulnerable groups in the area. In this context, the term 'Ecosystem of Care' includes not only the care of the individual but recognises and cares for groups that are typically discouraged from frequenting green spaces. An 'Ecosystem of Care' also addresses the natural inhabitants of green spaces and embraces the need to protect wildlife. Finally, it also refers to democratic care and conflict resolution. This holistic approach to care, together with the focus on 'programming' the use of the space to foster inclusion is an original contribution of the pilot project. The project was implemented by two different organisations in two different contexts.

Transition Graz is an organisation that aims at implementing the concept of 'Transition Towns' in the local context of Graz. They worked closely with Illusions, a community development centre in the Triester neighbourhood where the two green spaces included in the project were situated. Both green spaces were underutilised and serving as space of conflict and exclusion rather than enjoyment and gathering. The project identified non-users, entered dialogue with users, non-users and stakeholders and developed numerous activities to attract new users. An unexpected impact has been the redesign of one of the spaces, to make it more attractive for new users as well as small investments in 'hardware' that were appearing as necessary to improve the use of the spaces.

The second project was implemented by *aquí*, a social innovation collective based in Barcelona, in the Parque de l'Espanya Industrial (Park of the Industrial Spain), located in the neighbourhood of Sants, one of the very few green spaces in the centre of the city. This means the space is used intensively and the use even leads to conflicts and exclusions of certain users. Groups of non-users were identified through the project and different activities developed to create 'space' for these potential users in the park. Co-creation with those target groups and other users was a technique used to define these new activities.

Both projects confirmed the innovative nature of differentiating between the hardware/infrastructure and software/programming. Because programming the use is innovative, there are no existing structures to take responsibility and bring together the different users. This has been one of the major challenges in both locations. The power and potential impact of programming the use is however confirmed through the achievements. Success being defined as opening the use of the green space for groups which feel excluded. These are vulnerable or discriminated groups like e.g., young women and girls in the case of Graz and the LGBTQI+ community in Barcelona. The projects also confirmed the power of participation and co-creation. In the case of Graz, the approach through programming the use resulted in also impacting the design: the project has triggered new investments in the spaces and users being now systematically involved when renovating or deciding on new infrastructures in the green spaces of the city of Graz.

Caring workspaces

The pandemic brought about significant changes in the way people work. On one hand, it redefined the meaning of essential work and essential skills, as the work of healthcare and care workers (a sector over-represented by women) emphasised the central role of emotional labour, emotional intelligence, and skills such

as flexibility, empathy, and resilience. On the other hand, the unprecedented rise in telework, along with the closure of schools and childcare facilities during lockdowns, contributed to the further blurring of the boundaries between the private sphere and the sphere of paid work, putting an excessive pressure on many working parents. All these shifts have highlighted the need for more care-sensitive workspaces that provide for an inclusive environment for its employees and contribute to dismantle the division between paid and unpaid care work, through work-life balance arrangements. The innovation proposed by this pilot action consisted in the co-creation of a 'better story' of a caring gender+ workspace that is inclusive, diverse, and safe for employees at all levels, while also responding to the new challenges posed by the pandemic and the increase in teleworking (for the idea and concept of 'better story', see Chapter 9). The action was aimed at creating a checklist of tools and practices to be implemented by two types of organisations (non-governmental organisations and social enterprises) that would reflect a caring workspace environment and the launch of an award to identify best practices. The project was implemented by Postane, a multi-purpose urban hub based in Istanbul that hosts social and environmental impact-focused organisations, and Hafiza Merkezi, an independent human rights organisation that provides grant support to forty-eight CSOs based in Türkiye. After launching a questionnaire among NGOs, the two organisations set up a co-creation process through focus groups with fifty organisations who contributed to the drafting of the checklist of tools and practices for a caring working environment. While the network of Hafiza Merkezi provided an excellent source of participants, a follow-up of the implementation of the checklist has not been fully completed. Nonetheless, the dissemination of the checklist and the involvement of organisations in its design has started a process of discussion, leading to positive outcomes in terms of awareness raising on the need for caring working environments. The checklist proved to be a practical tool that could be used to expand the discussion beyond the Turkish context, and beyond the world of social enterprises and CSOs, but time and resource constraints prevented this scaling up at the time of the pilot.

Care fair

The dramatic effects of lockdowns and school closure on young people's mental health have been widely reported during the COVID-19 and afterwards (Bell et al., 2023), urging for the strengthening of support services. Access to wellbeing resources remains a significant challenge in improving the health of young adults in Europe. Education systems often lack the necessary resources and knowledge

to effectively screen and support adolescents in accessing help, even though evidence suggests that this age group experiences a crucial and delicate transition period (WHO, 2018). Empowering young people to take care of their own well-being has numerous short and long-term benefits, which are particularly important for building resilience during times of crisis. RESISTIRÉ embarked on an innovative project by introducing a Care Fair organised within a school setting as a novel approach to engage adolescents in deciding about their own needs. The primary objective was to reduce barriers to access support services, while the secondary objective aimed to enhance resilience and foster mutual support among young individuals. The project was implemented by Nevypusť duši, a non-profit organisation established in 2016. The Care Fair took place on April 21, 2022, in Rumburk, a small city located in the northern region of the Czech Republic. The implementation process relied on the original concept. A diverse and enthusiastic board, comprised of twelve students, was responsible for designing the fair and overseeing the entire process. The results, both in terms of the process and immediate impact, exceeded the expectations. One of the reasons for the project's success was the collaboration with the student board in the fair's co-design. The pilot project relied on the support of many volunteers to make the Care Fair financially feasible. While incorporating an intersectional lens throughout the project proved challenging due to limited availability and sensitivity in collecting and handling information on intersectional vulnerabilities, the research and design phase employed an inclusive approach. This led to an event that was considered inclusive by design. The topics covered during the Care Fair were chosen with the intention of addressing these difficulties. The end-result confirmed that the Care Fair approach is feasible and can effectively reach young people, raise awareness of available services, and empower them to prioritize their own mental health and support each other. However, the main challenge lies in finding organisations willing to adopt and implement this idea in their respective regions and countries. Nevypusť duši will continue to organise similar events in other schools, but there is a lack of such organisations throughout Europe. This lack of response was evident in the low number of eligible proposals received for this pilot project, with only one submission. An additional challenge is related to finances. In addition to expertise, organising such an event requires financial resources, which further hinders organisations that need to allocate scarce funds to their existing activities rather than diversifying into the organisation of care fairs.

Resilient together – We will survive secondary trauma

Lockdowns, increased isolation, movement restrictions, and similar measures, introduced to mitigate the COVID-19 infections, have contributed to the intensification of gender-based violence, both in real life and online. While service providers have been extraordinarily supportive, they faced significant pressure (e.g., increased workload, lack of resources, etc.) that showed the structural fragilities of the support organisations. Practitioners in this field are highly exposed to the risk of suffering secondary trauma, burn-out, compassion fatigue, exhaustion, or depression. Often these people, due to their overwork, ignore their need for self-care and/or even fail to recognise it. Despite evidence of the important role played by these organisations in responding to the urgent needs of victims of gender-based violence, their needs were not addressed in the recovery policies. While numerous studies and literature have been devoted to documenting the occurrence and importance of secondary trauma, the pilot project aimed at focusing on prevention programmes, as well as strategies and actions to counter it. Through the creation of a Community of Practice (CoP) for people working with gender-based violence victims and survivors, the pilot sought to create a peer-support group, and a co-learning model. This was successfully set up by Chayn, a global non-profit organisation working on digital resources to support survivors of gender-based violence and leading the project. Fourteen organisations took part in the CoP. The first step in their involvement was the completion of an introductory survey. This helped to identify individual and organisational needs and risks of secondary trauma and burnout. The results were processed by Chayn and used to develop a peer support programme. A digital learning hub was created, and various activities were implemented, including online workshops, collective care sessions, and peer support through pairing groups. Chayn contributed to the design of the activities with their 'trauma-informed approach'. Despite efforts, the attendance rate for the collective care sessions has been low, revealing resistances of frontline workers to perform self-care practices and structural barriers (e.g., time available, prioritising the cause at the detriment of their self-care). Only two workshops were conducted, thus preventing the creation of a robust co-learning network among participants. Difficulties in communication, and a mismatch between the ambitious goals set at the beginning and the resources available, coupled with barriers during the process, hindered the achievements of some objectives, as well as the process of monitoring and evaluation. Such negative impact was observed in the underestimation of the efforts needed for the creation of a living community of practice. The project's lead also

expressed concern for the limited budget available to carry out the activities foreseen, particularly those aimed at creating a robust community.

Inclusive schools – A toolbox to engage all parents and guardians in dialogue

Across many European states, school closures and online teaching introduced during COVID-19 had wide ranging ramifications for teachers, students, and parents/guardians. For example, interaction between parents/guardians and schools was often strained or non-existent during the pandemic. It is well established that parental engagement with in-school activities (for example, attending parent-teacher meetings) impacts positively on pupils' experience of learning. Quality communication between parents/guardians and schools can help to identify needs and prevent potential problems for students. However, according to the context, certain groups of parents/guardians may be significantly distant from their child's education experience. Moreover, as research from RESISTIRÉ showed, during the COVID-19 crisis this condition became even more evident since many parents/guardians felt excluded and neglected in relation to their children's schooling. This is also due to some vulnerability factors, such as socio-economic background, migrant background, or refugee status (Strid et al., 2022). Against this context, this pilot project aimed at developing a toolbox for secondary schools to engage parents/guardians from marginalised and/or disadvantaged backgrounds and foster an open dialogue within the school environment. This innovation aims at improving parental engagement and building the conditions for resilience in times of crisis. Romedia Foundation, a Roma-led NGO based in Budapest, proposed to implement the toolbox idea with a specific focus on disadvantaged Roma families, therefore targeting intersectional discrimination based on low socio-economic status and ethnicity, combined with gender-based discrimination in the case of Roma women. Romedia's work is devoted to amplifying marginalised voices and redefining traditional conceptions of Romani identity. The organisation had also previous experience in working with the youth's empowerment and strengthening Roma communities.

Romedia launched the project with a first mapping exercise, including an online survey, fieldwork consisting of interviews and ethnographic observations of teacher-parent meetings in three different schools. Research fed them information to design the toolbox, which was subsequently tested in three workshops at the three different schools, involving parents, schoolteachers, and social workers. As a conclusion, the toolbox was presented at a conference in May 2023, and discussed with invited experts and practitioners in the field of education and

Roma rights. In total, fifty-five people attended this conference. A short film was also released, to showcase the project and its achievements. Overall, Romedia successfully mobilised their networks and expertise to launch a unique initiative in Hungary and overcame resistances on the topic by involving schools who showed interest in the project. Despite issues with teachers' workload, and the managing of a divisive topic, Romedia found the recipe to raise awareness on the importance of the parent-teacher communication among schools.

Engaging with gender-based violence through sports

As emerged during the pandemic, pre-existing inequalities can be exacerbated during crisis situations, as was the case with gender-based violence. It is recognised that strengthening prevention efforts targeted at young people is one of the most important ways to address and eliminate the root causes of this phenomenon. Whilst awareness programmes are usually provided in the context of formal education, there are few examples of successful initiatives in the informal education sector. The innovation proposed by RESISTIRÉ involved the use of sport as a tool of Non-Formal Education (NFE) to foster gender equality, and thus prevent gender-based violence. Sport is known to have an important character-building effect on children and young people (Gasparini & Cometti, 2010). It can also promote social and personal values such as team spirit, discipline, perseverance, and fair play. However, if poorly designed or managed, sport activities can increase the risk of reinforcing gender stereotypes, heteronormativity, and male dominance. Moreover, gender-based violence is still prevalent in sports clubs (Council of Europe, 2019), although under-reported (Mergaert et al., 2016; Strid et al., 2023). The project was implemented by two different organisations in two different contexts and aimed to co-create and develop a programme of NFE activities to be implemented through sport to raise awareness of gender-based violence among young people, coaches, and managers.

The first project was implemented by ATINA, an NGO set up to support victims of trafficking from and through Serbia. For the pilot, the southern part of the country, a multi-ethnic region where Serbs, Albanians and Roma live together, was chosen. ATINA established a co-creative process to inform the design of the NFE training programme, which was directly related to sport and sport symbols and adapted to different topics such as the general concept of gender and harmful stereotypes, gender-based violence, discrimination, and cultural and gender identities. This project demonstrated that it is possible to use sport to convey messages to young people that go beyond sport itself and include tolerance, inclusion, gender equality, fair play, cooperation, and respect.

There was a strong sense of commitment to the project process on the part of the sports managers and coaches who were involved. A key challenge that was identified was their need for support in the implementation of this approach over time, through the integration of the NFE exercises and methods into their normal training sessions.

The second project was carried out in Greece by Altis Sports Club, an organisation based in Athens and dedicated to the training of young athletes. The pilot project was carried out in collaboration with the Centre for Gender Studies of the Panteion University. Together, they organised several activities leading to the design of a NFE training programme, which focused on awareness-raising among all stakeholders, including sessions to reflect on different aspects of gender-based violence, and sports camps where practice was designed as a tool for non-formal education. To challenge the role of physical strength and to promote reflection and strategy development, the introduction of new sports games with different rules and balls was tested, allowing equal participation among athletes. The project proved effective in addressing gender inequality beyond sport. Although it was difficult to achieve a high level of participation from sports clubs and coaches, the results of their involvement in terms of awareness and willingness to improve their practices were very high. There was also a high level of awareness among athletes and their parents.

In conclusion, the results of the two pilot projects (ATINA and Altis) in this area have shown that combining sport activities with actions against gender-based violence is a very promising approach. Overall, the participants in these two actions, especially the coaches and sports administrators, gained an understanding of the need for action. In addition, the children and young people involved had the opportunity to reflect on the dynamics of inequality while having fun with their peers.

Drivers and barriers for changing gender+ relations

The nine pilot projects described in the previous sections sought to transform gender+ power relations in different domains where inequalities are rooted: work and labour, access to public spaces, education, and gender-based violence. Each of these projects has developed its own methods for achieving this goal, in accordance with the specific context and area under consideration. This section examines the main factors that enabled organisations in the pilot projects to achieve their objectives, as well as the barriers they faced and the nature of these barriers. This information was collected throughout the implementation of the projects by the RESISTIRÉ partners involved in the monitoring and evaluation

of the actions. Based on research by the International Centre For Research On Women (ICRW), six core levers are considered essential for social innovation to bring about change in women's well-being and empowerment: (1) breaking boundaries for strategic partnership; (2) involving beneficiaries in design and dissemination; (3) cultivating champions; (4) creating a buzz to make it stick; (5) taking advantage of opportune timing and context; (6) targeting efforts to reach the poor and, more generally, those on the margins of society (Malhotra et al., 2009). The following sections explore how some of these levers were used and combined in the RESISTIRÉ pilot projects, using examples and experiences that emerged during their implementation. Some of them are also explored by looking at the associated barriers that the implementing organisations faced and how they tried to overcome them.

Building strategic partnerships

During the COVID-19 emergency, we witnessed the importance of a strong civil society network to fill the gaps left by national welfare systems in responding to basic needs. Civil society organisations reacted quickly by reorganising their internal structure, strengthening, and expanding their networks, and identifying the needs of groups that fell through the cracks of the system (usually the most marginalised, migrants, etc.). The crisis has thus highlighted the importance of an active and dynamic civil society that builds bridges between hard-to-reach groups and local authorities. In this context, we collected examples of how CSOs have been able to support each other through partnerships both between CSOs and with the public sector. We also found that a key aspect for CSOs to improve their response to emerging social needs depends on their ability to rely on or foster strategic partnerships (Cibin et al., 2023). In the process of testing social innovation actions within RESISTIRÉ, this aspect was already considered in the selection phase of project proposals, in the knowledge that building alliances with strategic partners would have facilitated reaching and involving users and beneficiaries. It would also have helped to access contextual information and learn about existing conflicts or potential barriers to project implementation. For this reason, most calls for proposals required applicants to describe their existing network with other CSOs, organisations and institutions in their environment, in addition to their previous experience in the field.

The partnership aspect was indeed crucial and proved its potential in the implementation of the projects. In many cases, cooperation between organisations played a role from the very beginning of the action. In Green Spaces, Transition Graz worked in partnership with Friedensbüro, an experienced partner

in conflict mediation; in Preventing Gender-based violence through Sports, Altis Sports Club presented a proposal designed in collaboration with gender studies experts from Panteion University, bringing together academic expertise on gender issues and practical experience of sports activities in a complementary way. The added value of a partnership was the opportunity to gain relevant insights and support for the development process. In the Green Spaces project, for example, such a partnership was represented by the concept of an 'alliance of care', originally understood as the creation of a formal board of organisations that would meet regularly to discuss and support the implementation of the project. Such a space was intended to share expertise and encourage a participatory dynamic in which actions could be discussed and designed jointly by the different actors working in the area. In Resilient together, the pilot project on secondary trauma (Chayn), it was the composition of the leading organisations – led by survivors – that fostered an environment in which survivors of gender-based violence could succeed without being re-traumatised by toxic workplace culture and systems. Securing the support of the local authorities proved essential, not only to ensure that the activities could take place (e.g., use of public space, permits, etc.), but also as a key partner in improving the impact and sustainability of the projects.

Many pilot projects had already contacted the local authority and started to build links with it at the time of developing their project proposal. These links were usually maintained throughout the project, with the municipalities attending meetings and events (e.g., SOS Racismo, Transition Graz) and receiving concrete recommendations based on the project outcomes. On other occasions, the pilot project itself was an opportunity to attract the attention of the authorities and to demonstrate the relevance and potential of gender-transformative innovations. The Care Fair event, for example, allowed the organisation to bring higher authorities to the table for discussion, as well as other schools. Similarly, for *aquí* it was useful to show concrete activities and commitments to the authorities to approach them and start a discussion. Raising awareness of the project and linking the results to tangible solutions for the local communities also proved very effective. One of SOS Racismo's recommendations was implemented by the local municipality. However, partnership can also be challenging. It was often difficult to get different organisations around the same table for discussions or to set up a formal board, due to lack of time and excessive workloads of those involved, or due to external circumstances related to the national context (e.g., the Turkish political context in the case of Caring Workspaces). To overcome this, many pilots used different formats to meet the specific needs of the organisations to be involved in the partnership, e.g., bilateral meetings (Green Spaces – Transition

Graz), networking events (Green Spaces – *aquí*) or targeted campaigns to involve more stakeholders (Resilient Together – Chayn). In other cases, it was difficult to find suitable allies because of potential conflicts or ideological positions. In the case of Employers Who Care, SOS Racismo was reluctant to approach another association supporting migrant women, fearing that they would not recognise SOS Racismo as fully legitimate to work on issues related to exploitation and migration (as being mainly run by white, middle-class workers, although in recent years it has become de facto mixed, with domestic workers now part of the staff). In the end, SOS Racismo was able to clearly describe the aims of the project, highlighting the common interests of both organisations. A clear understanding of values and objectives helped to overcome a potential obstacle to collaboration.

Engaging beneficiaries and cultivating champions

This was probably one of the most challenging aspects, in all pilot projects, but at the same time a key ingredient for change. Implementing organisations struggled to engage users, making sure that the most marginalised groups were involved, explaining the goal of the project, creating interest, and ensuring the long-term participation of users (from the design to the implementation of the activities). This was due to different reasons: lack of trust in the potential for change or disillusionment, due to prior unsuccessful projects (Graz), lack of time and excessive workload (e.g., Romedia, Chayn), a divisive topic (Romedia), and resistance to change (Altis). Strategies to improve engagement were very similar in some cases. Some teams realised that more time was needed for this task, and that more efforts in explaining the project and in direct outreach were also necessary. Both Transition Graz and *aquí* struggled to set up formal Boards of Users and found useful instead to opt for direct outreach, and informal gatherings with beneficiaries. In the case of Transition Graz, the picnics became an opportunity to exchange ideas with users and were repeated periodically to this end. The *aquí* team organised informal interviews around a coffee or practiced self-immersion into a group to gain insights on their experiences. SOS Racismo also multiplied their outreach and devoted time to explain the project's goal, which turned out to be (partially) successful.

When creating a community of users, it is important that no one is left behind, and that no one's idea is neglected, while ensuring a safe space and flexibility. Issues with time and schedules were overcome by adopting flexible and diversified strategies of engagement: people who could not attend meetings were still able to contribute through different channels (e.g., WhatsApp, email) in both the case of SOS Racismo and *aquí*. This flexibility also allowed introverted people to express

themselves through the means of their choice (e.g., writing instead of speaking). Postane and Hafiza Merkezi combined the collection of better stories and background research at the start, followed by several focus groups with representatives of CSOs (NGO workers and social enterprises). These focus groups centred around the checklist with organisations interested in improving their workplace to build more programmatic approaches towards capacity building. Moreover, it is important that people feel part of the process and feel that their actions can bring about change (even if to a small degree). Co-creation aims at boosting this sense of ownership and interest into the project. An interesting example of the success of this approach is the experience of *aquí* with users and non-users. The queer group of non-users – who took part in the co-creation of the activities since the beginning – was more active and committed to the project, compared to the users, who did not participate into the co-creation workshops but rather at the end of the process. Another successful example is the board of students set up by Nevypusť duši. Service design was used in this case as a participative technique, and it contributed to the motivation of the students who saw the concept being developed step-by-step, but also observed how their contribution helped shaping the concept and the design of the event itself. Getting to know each other in advance was also important to create the community itself. *aquí* successfully experienced that organising a social gathering before a project's event increased participation among the group.

When users are diverse groups with conflicting interests, it might be more effective to select and involve only those individuals who are committed to change and self-reflection (e.g., SOS Racismo looked for allies among employers). In general, it is easier to involve people who appear to be more motivated and active, and these could become champions that attract more people to the initiative. Some pilot projects engaged also with parents and other actors (e.g., coaches) who can also be considered beneficiaries. Their involvement and interest in the project reflects positively on the impact of the activities. During ATINA's sports event, parents could also enjoy some outdoor activities while their children were playing. There was a space for them to practice yoga, and for small children to paint. In general, the co-creation concept translated into a holistic approach to the issue at end, and the involvement of different actors, their needs and perspective in a negotiation process. The fact that the pilot wasn't targeting only direct beneficiaries but their whole ecosystem, was regarded as particularly original and effective in making the process participatory, and its results more sustainable over time (e.g., Romedia). At times, some actors can hold conservative positions regarding change and resist new methods or approaches. While coaches in ATINA's experience were open and enthusiastic, Altis struggled to get

managers of sports clubs on board and convincing them on the significant merit of a shift in sports environment and culture. As the team suggested, the introduction of incentives in the future could facilitate a cultural change: from one side acknowledging those clubs that embrace certain values in sports, from the other side, leveraging on parents to support these clubs, and not others. When approaching beneficiaries in general, it appears that all pilot projects needed to take a step back and dedicate more time to the presentation of the project's goal, and to bridging the gap between a technocratic language and the vocabulary of the layperson. Altis, for example, worked hard to adapt the vocabulary of gender studies and make it relevant and accessible for people in sports, to make sure the participants did not feel alienated and fully embraced the content of the project. Ensuring diversity and representation of the least represented groups is another challenge when implementing social innovations geared towards equality and justice. Asking the right questions about who is missing and why in each social space is key. *aquí* embraced this approach by including in their mapping both users and non-users of the park, with different strategies to involve both. In the case of Care Fair, being the students recruited on a voluntary basis, Nevypusť duši struggled to ensure inclusion and diversity. Eventually, the team decided to accept all candidates.

Cultivating champions is another possible way to boost participation and it was successfully used by the *aquí* team, for example. The team envisaged since the beginning the possibility to have different engagement levels, with champions playing an important role in bridging the gap between the implementing team and the target users. During one of their workshops, a champion emerged that was subsequently involved as a supporter. In a similar way, Nevypusť duši first approached two teachers who saw the enthusiasm and impact of the project on the students of the board and conveyed this enthusiasm to their colleagues inside the school. The Student Board set up by Nevypusť duši also became a natural catalyser of interest among the community of students. However, it might not always be easy to look for champions: Transition Graz tried the same approach but failed in identifying or involve champions.

Capitalising on an opportune timing and context

One of the projects on preventing gender-based violence through sports was implemented at a very opportune moment in time, when the MeToo in sports was happening in Greece. This situation sparked interest among coaches and parents and became yet another facilitating factor in the development of the project. Moreover, the support of testimonials like that of Sofia Bekatorou (Olympic

sailing medal winner) was important to raise the attention and awareness on the importance of prevention in and through sports. A change in political lead is also a good opportunity to advocate for social innovations. This was the case in Graz, where the pilot project secured support from the newly elected mayor, and subsequently submitted a list of proposals/recommendations to the municipality to improve the green spaces, based on the results of the project. Similarly, in Spain, the project with allied employers was implemented in a crucial moment, as Spain recently ratified the ILO Convention 189 on domestic workers. Debates and mobilisations were also increasing in the country around this topic, increasing the opportunities for such innovations to spark attention. However, difficulties also emerged during the implementation, such as the short time frame to implement the project (approximately eight months) and the scarce resources available (Care Fair). In other cases, it was the political environment or external events, as the earthquake in Türkiye that hindered the implementation of the pilots. Postane and Hafıza Merkezi planned a joint workshop to draw a framework on their future activities, but this plan has been suspended with the urgency of the earthquakes that hit the country and transformed all NGOs' short-term agendas.

Gender+ approach into focus: Target efforts to reach vulnerable and marginalised groups

The main objective of the pilot projects was to test innovations that have the potential to respond to social problems and improve the quality of life of target groups that have been most affected or marginalised by the virus itself or by public policies to contain the pandemic. The requirement to apply a gender+ approach to their proposals has led applicant organisations to design projects that address gender+ inequalities in different contexts and areas, as described below. In the case of SOS Racismo, the project targeted domestic workers, a large proportion of whom are women with a migrant background, sometimes without a regular residence permit and/or without a regular contract. The Transition Graz project targeted intersectional marginalised groups that were not usually present in green spaces to increase their access and presence (e.g., migrants, women and girls, socio-economically disadvantaged people, queer people). Similarly, the *aquí* project considered a gender+ approach as a key driver towards a more inclusive and accessible public space, which resulted in a strategy that successfully engaged with the queer community. In the case of Chayn, the focus was on the mental and physical health of caregivers, mainly women, supporting victims of gender-based violence, to mitigate their 'care fatigue' (Özdemir

& Kerse, 2020) and the risk of experiencing secondary trauma. ATINA's focus on southern Serbia combined awareness-raising on gender-based violence with efforts to promote social integration in an area characterised by ethnic diversity and migration. Gender+ sensitivity can be found in the Romedia Foundation's Toolbox project, which challenged the gender roles of parents and addressed the intersectional vulnerabilities of Roma mothers. The Postane implementation team put a gender+ perspective at the heart of their research methodology, which resulted in the inclusion of several checklist items addressing inequalities at the intersection of age, race/ethnicity, class, disability, and sexuality. Although this was a challenging task given the limited budget and timeframe, overall, all projects managed to have an impact on gender+ inequalities. This was mainly due to the co-creation phase, the benefits of which in terms of inclusiveness and ensuring the participation of the marginalised target groups will be presented in the following final discussion.

Lessons learnt from the social innovations in RESISTIRÉ

The following discussion presents three main lessons from the RESISTIRÉ experience, which can also serve as a more general guide to be considered when fostering bottom-up social innovation actions, at the local level, to promote inclusiveness.

Main factors affecting the impacts of pilot projects

The experiment of RESISTIRÉ with the development and testing of seven different potential social innovations contributes to a better understanding of the role CSOs can play in developing solutions for unmet needs, needs that are neither covered by the public or private sectors. None of the organisations that have been selected to perform the tests, can be considered as being active in social innovations. Their purpose is to change society or offer services to specific groups that are left behind. If they innovate, it is a means to an end, a consequence of their activities and the context in which they operate, rather than a goal they pursue. The organisations leading the pilots were selected because the domain in which they are active always has a link to the theme of the proposed innovation. This meant that all of them had to get out of their comfort zone. When implementing the pilots, they had to develop new alliances or try out techniques they had not used before. The 'success' of the nine pilots illustrates the potential to generate innovations based on research results, and leverage on the capacity of CSOs to test and launch them. The diversity of the profiles of the organisations

running the pilots shows the potential of the model. However, two additional factors need to be considered that can lead to greater impact. One is the gender+ approach which was in a way imposed on the pilot project implementers. With few exceptions (Chayn, Altis in consortium with Panteion university), this was an expertise that was not core of the implementers. Still, there was an openness and an understanding of the need for such approach. During implementation, practical barriers were encountered, mainly linked to ethical considerations about the opportunity to collect sensitive intersectional data (e.g., sexual orientation, religion, disability) to ensure diversity within a given space (like GDPR[1]). A solution has been to pursue inclusion at all stages and moments. Inclusive design and design for all are practices that can contribute as they embed participation of the users in the design and implementation process. Another solution is the intersectional lens to be used in all action-research activities. The difficulties to get actual data on different vulnerabilities cannot be used as an alibi for not using the intersectional lens.

The second factor is co-creation. The concepts of the seven social innovations were initially co-created in the Open Studios, a cornerstone of the RESISTIRÉ methodological approach and described in Chapters 2 and 3. But co-creation was embedded as well in the concepts of each pilot. Pilot leads were expected to involve users and stakeholders in the pilot's detailed design and implementation. Two of the pilot implementers did have the design competence in-house, which facilitated the use of co-creation techniques. But all other implementers managed to 'co-create' key components of their project. This has been critical for the success and has also meant the acquisition of new skills and an experience that can and will be used in future by these organisations.

Creating conditions for sustainable change

Most of the CSOs implementing the pilot projects affirmed that they are interested in keeping the projects alive. They use different strategies to make this possible and embed the service into their permanent activities, including through the submission of projects proposals to different institutions to get more funding. This was the case with the SOS Racismo pilot project, which received regional funding to continue innovating by developing and testing a prototype

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1   Many discriminations are not visible (sexual orientation, religion, ability,...). This limits the possibility to ensure diversity for some activities, like a Board of Users. It would indeed be not ethical to ask for such information as a condition for involving or recruiting a person.

public service to match job supply and demand specifically for the domestic work sector. Or the case of Nevypusť duši, which recently submitted a project proposal at the regional level for a three-year grant, including the scaling-up of activities tested during the Care Fair project in other schools in the region. On the other side, other CSOs are struggling to maintain continuity, mainly due to lack of funding and human resources.

Despite the persistence of structural barriers, conditions for sustainability can be created. The projects that succeeded in building capacity have planted seeds and awareness among the actors involved, who by introducing the innovations into their daily practices, make a great contribution to sustainable change. At ATINA, for instance, seven out of ten clubs and their coaching teams continued to use practical NFE methods in their day-to-day work, eventually mastering them with additional training and support. Co-creation has laid the foundations for capacity building. As for *aquí* and their success in engaging two non-user target groups, queer and women, with whom they co-create cineforum with films and documentaries selected from their suggestions. As pilot projects demonstrated, when beneficiaries are involved directly in the development and testing of innovative practices, and they understand the importance of their agency in changing gender roles, they are more likely to own those changes and incorporate them in their daily life. Innovative ideas, tools and approaches *survive, spread, and transform* into updated practices and new initiatives, developed by the implementing organisations or by others with whom they share them, in a process of collective exchange. This highlights the importance of strengthening and expanding networks as well as collaborations with other CSOs and public authorities.

However, adequate funding systems for CSOs and policy frameworks are needed to sustain this process in the long term. Planting the seed of change required support, and while the seed could grow in the short term, new funding and political support are needed to keep the flame burning in the future. Civil society organisations are key actors in curbing social inequalities and contributing to the strength of democracy and human rights. While they carry out such important tasks, they run against structural barriers, such as structural underfunding (Altınay et al., 2023), the deterioration of civic space (FRA, 2021), and increased workload (Cibin et al., 2023), circumstances that may be exacerbated during crises. In Cibin and colleagues (2023, pp. 74–75) we formulated some recommendations to make better stories of civil society sustainable. First, making their financial systems more stable, which is key to allow long-term processes of trust-building with hard-to reach communities. CSOs often fill gaps in the provision of services that should be guaranteed by the public sector, therefore pointing at the need for structural changes in public policies. CSOs can provide

valuable insights on how to shape these policies in a way that ensure reaching the most marginalised, making prevention and multi-sectoral collaboration a reality. Moreover, coalitions among CSOs and with public authorities is key to develop inclusive care systems, where several needs of people in different social and economic conditions are considered. Against this background, the implementation of the pilot projects confirmed some of these findings and offered additional insights on the barriers to replicate the innovations in other countries and contexts, and to their multiplication. For multiplication the main barrier is the availability of resources as described above (whether staff or funding). For replicability, the main barrier is the absence of structures and mechanisms to spread the innovations, including resources to facilitate the transfer of experience and adaptation to the different contexts.

Impacts on organisations and their ecosystem

A social innovation ecosystem is aimed at fostering the development and growth of social innovation, in part by improving interactions between actors (OECD, 2021). For this to happen and generate public value, it is necessary to have an environment with different actors, each of which plays a key role in the success of the project (Conejero Paz & Redondo Lebrero, 2016). Whether it is an institution (e.g., school, municipality), an NGO or grassroots initiatives, synergies between different actors can be crucial to create an external ecosystem that supports the different stages of an innovative social project. Pilot projects were successful in building or strengthening existing networks and collaborations, empowering CSOs within their environment. Synergies between the implementing organisations and their stakeholders were key in the successful development of the activities. Schools involved in the pilots showed interest and collaborated at different levels in the projects (e.g., allowing a day of absence during the celebration of the sports event or acknowledging the Care Fair as a school activity). The green spaces projects succeeded in influencing public authorities, either by pointing at gender+ issues that weren't previously addressed or demonstrating the power of co-designing renovations with users and non-users. Similarly, the success of pilot projects also translated into sustained support from local authorities, and the willingness for some of them to implement recommendations based on the results of the actions. When implementing the RESISTIRÉ pilot projects, the CSOs were also encouraged to adopt innovative approaches within their organisations, which could be useful in achieving the set objectives. The monitoring and evaluation process revealed that, for some of these organisations, the pilots triggered skills, changes, and reflections that affected the organisational sphere.

Some of the organisations had expertise in gender+ issues, while others were supported by allies to provide this insight. In both cases, the pilot projects became opportunities to raise awareness about gender+ inequalities within the organisations themselves, and to change their practices and methods towards more gender-sensitive approaches.

Insights for future social innovators

In conclusion, the social innovation actions developed in RESISTIRÉ and covered in this chapter are considered to be potentially effective in reducing gender+ inequalities in specific areas. The identified drivers and barriers for testing social innovation pilots can be applied at different times and in different places. They can also be used to monitor the progress of projects. The application of a gender+ approach and the use of co-creation as a tool can sustain the potential to have an impact on reducing inequalities. It is necessary to consider local needs and the broader ecosystem supporting the implementing CSOs, as these are important aspects to influence the success of projects and to generate and sustain various social innovations over time.

The experience with the RESISTIRÉ pilot projects provides several insights for future social innovation projects aimed at tackling gender+ inequalities. First, it shows how research results can be effectively used as a source to identify and develop social innovations. The cooperation between researchers and activists creates new value in the sense that ideas can be prototyped and tested through the collaboration between both. The second insight concerns the sustainability of innovations. The organisations who tested the innovation will in most cases manage to sustain it after the end of the project. However, successful innovations are still not easy to replicate and multiply, without the support of stakeholders that have or create the incentive and conditions for this replication and multiplication to happen. This calls into question the role of public authorities at different levels, and the need for a shift in funding models towards transformative funding schemes, that are participatory, flexible, long-term, and geared to capacity-building. These schemes can support the activities of civil society organisations and enable a rapid and effective civic response, both in times of crisis and in normal times.

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The 'why' and the 'how' of using narratives in intersectional research: The experience of RESISTIRÉ

Introduction

The aim of the RESISTIRÉ project was to understand how COVID-19 policies impacted gendered inequalities in Europe and how societies in general and particularly, vulnerable groups responded to these inequalities. The perspective of vulnerable groups was central to this aim, and for that reason narrative interviews which use a 'grand' open ended question to both invite and allow the narrator/interviewee to tell their story in their own way, were chosen as a component of the wider project methodology. Within RESISTIRÉ narratives were considered as 'a wonderful opportunity to grasp the complexity of stories that may not be told otherwise' (Kim, 2019, p. 16) and the narratives gathered across the EU27, except Malta (hereinafter EU26), Iceland, Serbia, Türkiye, and the UK, showed how COVID-19 and policy responses to the pandemic impacted individuals across many aspects of their lives and identities.

Narratives, deployed as they were in RESISTIRÉ, champion voices that are often excluded, and act as a vehicle for hearing the perceptions, observations and understandings of the lived experience of the narrators, as told in their own voice/voices. Narratives recognise people as vital sources of information and experience (Gubrium et al., 2012), whilst moving away from the idea of an 'expert' retrieving information from an 'informant'. Narratives also worked with the aims of the project because they aid a deep comprehension of 'how the personal and social are entwined over time' (Clandinin, 2006, p. 51).

Importantly, the narrative approach was selected due to its ability to address the multiple, concurrent levels of complexity inherent in the RESISTIRÉ project design (see Chapter 2). On the one hand, the global pandemic was not only a health crisis, but also an economic, social, and political crisis, with devasting impacts on individuals, families, collectives of people, economies, and societies (ILO, 2020; UN, 2020; WHO, 2020). While on the other hand, its impact was not the same for everyone, but was mediated by differential exposure to multiple,

intersecting vulnerability factors (Lokot & Avakyan, 2020; Walter & McGregor, 2020; Sciensano, 2020). Narrative interviewing, recognised as a complexity-informed method (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014; McCall, 2015), was chosen because it is well equipped to shed light on the relationships between the multiple levels of impact of the pandemic showing how they were experienced and conceptualised by each narrator. The method also allows for gathering information fast, which was key in the context of the evolving pandemic as the purpose of the narratives was to feed the open studies. In the narratives, we were able to see 'in action' how different intersectional vulnerability profiles played out in the face of specific, personalised blends of economic, social, and political challenges, leading to a diverse set of outcomes.

While contemporary literature strongly advocates for the integration of intersectional perspectives, particularly in gender studies, there exists a noticeable gap in methodological approaches for its practical application. This deficiency extends to narrative inquiry, an analytical domain widely acknowledged as particularly conducive to intersectional research. Addressing this gap is crucial for enhancing the practical implementation of intersectionality within the field (Chadwick, 2017; Cole, 2009) and for intersectional approaches to become more than an 'empty gesture' (May, 2015, p. 226). As such this chapter seeks to advance the understanding of the application of intersectional perspectives within qualitative research. Our focus centres on employing narrative inquiry as a tool to amplify the voices of marginalised communities. The primary objective is to contribute to traditional and theoretical goals of research projects and to foster an environment conducive to learning and collaborative solution- building.

Narratives and their potential to illuminate different aspects of a narrators' experience are a rigorous instrument through which intersections can be exposed thus, illuminating the impact of how intersectionality is experienced daily by individuals/groups (Van Maanen, 1990). Inviting people to narrate their lives from their own experience and in their own voice allows for exploring how inequality grounds, intersect and are interconnected (Narayan & George, 2012, p. 514). Potentially, narratives can illuminate the 'cracks' in 'everyday lived experience, retaining complexity, blurring boundaries, and challenging dichotomies, and powerful discourses' (Cole, 2009, p. 14). Categories and how they intersect have the 'space' to emerge during narrative interviews this is aided by the narrator's perspective being valorised (Christensen & Jensen, 2012, p. 114).

This chapter addresses: (1) applying an intersectional approach within narrative inquiry to ensure that marginalised voices are included in the examination of societal crises; (2) the need for methodological flexibility as projects evolve with particular recourse to data collection and analysis; and (3) using narratives

in solution oriented research including primary insights gained regarding the potential and the challenges associated with the design and implementation of intersectional narrative inquiry.

Having discussed intersectionality and narratives, putting forward a brief snapshot of why and how they 'work' together, we now provide an outline of the data collection methods and analysis of the narratives used in RESISTIRÉ, followed by examples of how narratives were used during RESISTIRÉ with a particular focus on 'personas'. Finally, we consider the lessons and ways forward in relation to using narratives.

The narrative approach used in RESISTIRÉ

In RESISTIRÉ, the gender+ perspective on narrative inquiry aimed to ensure the representation of marginalised voices' perspectives less frequently heard in the context of crisis policymaking. The goal was twofold: first, to investigate the impact of crisis policy responses on everyday lives, highlighting differences in individual resilience. This approach aimed to uncover both the unequal effects of the crisis and possibilities to cope with it for those already vulnerable, considering material aspects such as differing preconditions and safety nets, as well as relational aspects, such as the effects of prejudices and preconceived notions encountered because of existing inequalities. Secondly, it sought to utilise the collected narratives to inform both policy- making and civil society responses, mitigating the negative effects for marginalised groups. This involved inviting representatives of these groups to participate in co-creative efforts to counteract acute and immediate problems created by both the pandemic and its policy responses efforts (See Chapter 3 on Open Studios). Additionally, there was a long-term agenda to 'build back better' integrating a gender+ perspective into recovery policies.

Part of the novelty of the RESISTIRÉ approach, and indeed one of its challenges, was to situate the intersectional narratives collected within a broader framework of policy analysis. Combining a broad scope, aiming to map out the unequal effects of COVID-19 policy across Europe with an interest in understanding the individual experience meant that the approach to data collection and analysis had to allow for both breadth and depth. Involving a network of researchers in thirty European countries, that generated a total of 793 narratives also meant working with a large sample. The sheer quantity of individual stories collected, combined with an aim to capture a diversity of experiences and an ambition to produce quick results – essentially tracking the evolution of the pandemic as it happened had implications for data collection and analysis. How we

approached these challenges is outlined below. The following should be read as a descriptive, not a prescriptive, account. It is but one example of how narrative methods can be used, and the aim of this section is largely to highlight the adaptability of the narrative approach.

This section describes the sampling strategy used, how the narrative interviews were conducted and how the narrative texts were constructed and analysed. One aspect that is addressed only indirectly is the importance of coordination when working with a large network of researchers. As this is the subject of Chapter 7, it receives minimal attention here, but it is worth emphasising that the coordination work within RESISTIRÉ was not limited to the written guidelines described below, it also included regular training and monitoring sessions.

Recruiting the narrators

Kim (2016, p. 166) states that 'the purpose of the interview in narrative inquiry is to let stories be told, particularly the stories of those who might have been marginalised or alienated from the mainstream, and those whose valuable insights and reflections would not otherwise come to light'. This emphasis on letting the stories of those marginalised from the mainstream come to light was central to RESISTIRÉ and naturally affected the recruitment strategy. Broadly speaking, the recruitment strategy used was purposive sampling. The logic behind purposive sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study of a given phenomenon, but how this is best done depends on the objectives of the study. Patton (2015) identified as many as 40 variations of purposive sampling used in qualitative research. Although not a clear-cut example of any of the strategies proposed by Patton (2015), the sampling approach used in RESISTIRÉ could be described as a form of maximum variation sampling. The narrative interviews aimed to understand how the pandemic was experienced from the perspective of 'vulnerable groups', hence some form of vulnerability was a criterion for the selection of participants. Since vulnerability is a term that can be questioned on several grounds, this requires some elaboration. Because labelling certain groups or individuals as 'vulnerable' can divert attention from the structural conditions that put them at risk, implying instead that they are somehow inherently vulnerable, it is worth noting that this was not how the term was used within the project. Instead, structural factors were emphasised, and the national researchers were asked to recruit individuals who had been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 policy responses.

A set of inequality grounds were used to guide the recruitment, these included sex/gender, class/socio-economic status, age, race/ethnicity, nationality,

religion/beliefs, disability, sexuality, and gender identity. The researchers were also instructed to consider the narrative's relevance to several policy domains drawn from the EC Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 (EC, 2020) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (UN Women, 1995). Namely, decision-making and politics, gender care gap, gender-based violence, gender pay and pensions gap, work and labour market, economy, human rights, and environmental justice. Using these inequality grounds and policy domains as a starting point, national researchers were asked to aim for diversity when recruiting, while also relying on their own judgment to select narrators who fitted the purpose of the study. This involved both maximum variation in terms of the inequality grounds covered and paying particular attention to intersecting inequalities. The project ran over three cycles, which meant that each subsequent cycle allowed for an assessment of the previous cycle, and the recruitment strategy could be adjusted according to questions such as: which voices are still missing from the narratives? Which policy domains are still left unexplored? The end goal was not to paint a complete picture of inequalities during the pandemic, but rather to show the diversity of experiences, the unique challenges faced by specific individuals or groups, and the patterns that cut across cases despite their diversity. Deciding who to include was not a straightforward process. Much was left to the discretion of the national researchers who, in addition to the inequality grounds mentioned, could select 'other' as an inequality ground if the narrative did not fit predefined categories. In the first cycle, however, one major limitation was applied as the researchers were asked to only recruit individuals who identify as women. Although focusing on the untold stories of women made sense from a feminist perspective, it also left other stories of inequality untold. Hence, for the second and third cycles, men and non-binary persons were included. This decision to recruit more broadly added to the richness and complexity of the material, but it also came with methodological challenges. The final sample was heavily skewed towards women, making up 82% of the sample, compared to men (14%) and non-binary (4%). Due to this bias, comparisons within the broad category of women were often more meaningful than comparison between different genders.

Conducting the narrative interviews

The narrative interview is typically conceptualised in contrast with – and as a critique of – the question-answer format of more traditional structured and semi-structured interviews (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). This shift from the idea that 'interviewees have answers to researchers' questions' to the idea that

'interviewees are narrators with stories to tell and voices of their own' (Chase, 2005, p. 660), implies a need to shift the power balance in the interview setting. In a more structured interview, the interviewer, who shapes and guides the interview with their questions, holds the power. Narrative interviews, by contrast, strive to make the interviewee the central actor (Kim, 2016). To achieve this, the researcher's interference in how the story is told needs to be minimised. That is not to say that a narrative interview is completely unstructured or that the interviewer should remain passive throughout. The researcher needs to come prepared, listen actively and ask clarifying questions when needed. In the first and second cycle, the narrative interview technique used followed conventional narrative techniques quite closely and resembled the narrative interview technique proposed by, for example, Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000). In the instructions given to the national researchers on how to conduct the interviews, the interview was divided into the following phases:

Preparation. The interviewer gets acquainted with the interview topic through desk research or other means. Within RESISTIRÉ, most national researchers also took part in other research activities such as the mapping of policies, social responses and rapid assessment surveys. These activities formed an important part of the preparation. Adapting the consent form to the national context was another part of the preparation.

Initialisation. The interviewer obtained permission to record the interview, introduced themselves and the project to the narrator. They explained the purpose of the collections of individual narratives, how they would be used, and the process of anonymisation and protection of the narrators' personal data. The narrator's rights were explained, making sure they understood their right to withdraw their consent at any point. The interviewer made sure that the consent form was understood and signed.

Main narration. In conducting the individual narrative interviews, the interviewer had a passive role primarily assuming a listening stance, aimed at capturing the narrator's story from their perspective, using their own words and with minimal interruption. The interview was an invitation for the individual to tell their story, and the narrator was the central actor. The interview started after a general background question, with an open 'grand' question that presented the general topic to focus the narrator. While taking a passive role, the interviewer was required to be an active listener, using nonverbal expressions of interest and attention, and occasionally asking probing or clarifying questions. At all times,

the interviewer had to be cautious not to interfere in ways that might alter the narrator's story as it was being told to them.

> General background question:
> *Can you please tell me a bit about yourself and your life circumstances?*
> 'Grand question' to start with:
> *Many persons have been affected by the COVID-19 situation in different ways. Can you describe to me how you have been affected by COVID-19 and what this has meant for your situation?*

Questioning phase. In this phase, additional questions were asked as needed. These were probing questions related to understanding the story-schema such as clarifying who, what, how, and why in relation to events, causes and consequences. For example, 'You've talked about many challenges you face as X. Can you tell me how you try to overcome those challenges?' Although this phase allowed for more probing, narratives are fluid and unexpected and the researchers were asked to let them emerge in the interviews without unnecessary interruptions.

Finalisation. In this phase the story was recapitulated, making sure the interviewer's understanding of the story was the same as the narrator's understanding. In the end, the interviewer thanked the narrator for sharing their experience and asked (1) if we could return for additional clarifications if needed and (2), if the narrator would like to validate the narrative once written.

The research process of RESISTIRÉ was iterative, with each cycle informing the next. During the first two cycles, the need to acknowledge inequalities in building resilience for future crises was firmly established both within the project and in other emerging literature on the pandemic. Additionally, the pandemic had been recognised as a potentially disruptive moment that could lead to systemic change. However, we noted that there was significantly less overall attention on what practices may transform inequality dynamics, and very little attention on individual and collective agency and strategies for change. As Chadwick (2017) states, intersectional narratives present a unique opportunity to go beyond dualistic notions of power as either top- down oppression or individual agency. While individual agency was very much present in the first two cycles of narratives, we saw a need to home in on this aspect of the narratives in a more systematic way. For that reason, Lister's (2021) taxonomy of agency guided both the data collection and analysis in cycle three. This taxonomy categorises agency according to two dimensions, both to be understood as a continuum rather than dichotomies. The dimensions are everyday-strategic and personal-political, and an action can be categorised as one of four forms of agency depending on how

it resonates with these dimensions. The four forms of agency are: 'getting by', the everyday-personal struggle to survive that often goes unrecognised as a form of agency; 'getting (back) at', everyday-political acts of resistance without a strategic aim; 'getting out', personal-strategic attempts to improve the personal situation; and finally, 'getting organised', political-strategic acts of collective agency and political action. Originally intended as an analytical tool to explore the agency exercised by people living in poverty, we deemed it fruitful to extend the application to marginalisation in a wider sense. Lister (2021) writes that the othering of people living in poverty tends to reduce them to passive objects and when they *are* construed as active subjects, the aim is usually to make them responsible for their own poverty. What Lister tries to do instead is to acknowledge 'the complex subjectivity of fellow human beings trying to negotiate their lives in adverse circumstances' (Lister, 2021, p. 122). This reasoning behind Lister's taxonomy resonated with the aims of RESISTIRÉ as it allowed us to explore individual agency within the broader structures and policy contexts that constrain that agency.

Due to this more targeted focus on agency and the theoretical framework used in cycle three, the interview procedure had to be adapted. Whereas the interviews in cycle one and two were more conventional narrative interviews, in cycle three they are best described as a hybrid model of narrative and semi-structured interviews (Anderson & Kirkpartrick, 2016; Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; Ziebland, 2013). As in previous cycles, the interview started with a 'grand question' inviting the narrator to share their experiences of the pandemic. The third cycle, however, added emphasis on how the narrator had handled the effect of the pandemic on their everyday lives. An additional list of probing questions related to the four forms of agency identified by Lister (2021) was also provided to the national researchers. These questions did not have to be covered but they could be used to gently encourage the narrator to speak about their own agency. For example, to explore aspects relating to 'getting out', the following prompts were suggested:

> *What kind of long-term strategies does the narrator have to 'get out' of distress, e.g., getting medical help, work, or education? What have been the opportunities/difficulties/responses from actors/policies they have encountered (in relation to what they have already shared with you during the interview)? Where would they like to be in a year or so (dreams and aspirations)?*

In addition to the focus on individual agency, the national researchers were instructed to identify 'better stories' in the cycle three narratives. The concept 'better stories', borrowed from the feminist scholar Dina Georgis (2013), is the subject of the final chapter of this book where it's significance to the project

will be described in more detail, but in the context of the narratives, the agency exercised by the narrators was the 'better story'. These acts ranged from small, everyday acts of resilience to individuals 'getting out' or 'getting organised' seemingly against all odds. The search for 'better stories' had limited impact on how the interviews were conducted as it had to be balanced with the need to keep interference to a minimum. In cases where narrators spoke of severe hardship, it was also ethically problematic to ask them for their 'better story'. It did, however, influence the sampling strategy as national researchers were encouraged to seek out individuals who they believed had a better story to tell. As seen below, it also had an impact on how the narrative interviews were reported.

Constructing the narratives

Once an interview had been completed, the national researcher who conducted the interview was tasked with constructing an account of the narrative that was collected from the interview. The narrative was constructed using relevant elements from the interview and the national researchers were informed that the narrative report should include an account of the following:

- Personal characteristics and demographics of the narrator.
- Background variables of the narrator such as life situation, family, working status.
- The problems/struggles described by the person.
- The causes and consequences/effects as understood by the person and how they related to COVID-19.
- The sequence of events as they were described.
- Main actors involved.
- Places/locations involved.
- Triggers of specific situations.
- Actions, events, or other situations that made a positive difference to the narrators' lives (especially about policy or civil society responses).

In the third cycle, the national researchers were also asked to include in the account of the narrative the form(s) of agency exercised by the narrator that emerged during the interview.

The narrative, as far as possible, highlighted the intersections of identities and inequality grounds, leaving space for how social identities can be both empowering and oppressive and how a person can be both a victim and in various ways engage in micro-resistance even in difficult situations. The narrative reports were written in English and in most cases interview segments

had to be translated from the narrator's native language. The aim was for the narrative to be written as far as possible in the narrator's own voice. For confidentiality reasons, the narrators were referred to by pseudonyms in the narrative reports. A suggested word limit for the main narrative text was approximately 750 words.

The researchers were instructed to write the narratives in first person. Using the first-person perspective has the benefit of making the reader see 'the story from the perspective of the participant, which increases feelings of affinity' (Scheffelaar et al., 2021). It also implies a sense of ownership, that the stories belong to the narrators rather than the researchers (Byrne, 2017). At the same time, transforming a longer interview into a short, coherent narrative usually requires some 'narrative smoothing' (Kim, 2016). This comes with the risk of producing a story that is very different from the one told by the narrator, with implications for the trustworthiness and the ethics of the study. Although not always possible due to the narrow timeframe of the project, national researchers were encouraged to use participant validation, asking the narrator to read and confirm the validity of the narrative (see the 'finalisation' stage of conducting the interview). This step was especially important when narrators had shared sensitive information or when interviews were particularly fragmented and considerable 'reconstruction work' was involved.

Constructing the narratives involved substantially reducing the rich accounts in the stories told to us and entailed choosing the most important points in relation to the research aims. While, also staying true to the narrator's 'ownership' of the story they choose to share, considerable analytical skills were also required. Kim (2016, p. 190) states that narrative analysis is always interpretative in some sense, and that analysis and interpretation work together to find 'narrative meaning'. As researchers involved in the analysis of the final, constructed narratives, we found it difficult not to ponder what might have been lost in the process: what subtle nuances might have been missed? Would a different researcher, have interpreted this person's story in the same way? No matter how detailed the instructions are, and no matter how skilled the researcher, some variation in how the task is approached is unavoidable. As in all projects of this scale, involving a large number of researchers, it is vital to relinquish control and to trust in each other's ability to perform the assigned work.

The final narrative text was inserted in a standardised Excel grid that also contained a number of other sections for the national researcher to fill in. Some were free text options, e.g., a headline capturing the essence of the

narrative, specifically telling quotes from the interview and keywords relevant to the narrative. Others included drop-drown menus from which the researcher could choose an option, e.g., policy domains and inequality grounds relevant to the narrative. In the third cycle, additional sections were included that asked the researcher to briefly describe the participants 'better story' and which form(s) of agency was present in the story. The researcher was also asked to pay particular attention to 'better stories' and forms of agency when constructing the narrative.

The narrative below, told by 53-year-old 'Irina' from Romania, is an example of how a narrative could be constructed. The narratives usually start with introducing the narrators and describing their life before the pandemic. In some cases, such as Irina's, there is a need to go further back in time. In her story, there is another 'before' of importance, namely her life before she was diagnosed with schizophrenia. The narrative then moves on to describe struggles faced during the pandemic and how they were handled. As this narrative is based on an interview conducted in the third cycle, the national researcher indicated that this was a 'better story' of 'getting by' as Irina found ways to cope with the situation and tried to live a rich, fulfilling life in a context of limited means and opportunities. There are also elements of 'getting organised' present in this narrative, as getting in touch with a CSO was central to Irina's rediscovery of her sense of self:

> 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 socialising 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.

In Irina's story inequalities relating to her gender, mental illness and socio-economic status intersect. Due to her illness, she was already living an isolated life prior to the pandemic, but the fear of the virus made the situation worse, not least as she felt a need to protect her mother. Like many other narratives, Irina's story shows the gendered nature of care, but the caring relations are more complex than in many others as she is the carer and the one being cared for. The narrative relates to policy and inequalities in healthcare, welfare,

digitalisation, and care work, but it is also a moving story about downwards social mobility and the stigma of mental illness. Irina had a 'different life' prior to her diagnosis, and the isolation she experiences is not likely to have ended post pandemic. The return to normal discernible at the end of the narrative does not apply to her as she 'is not part of this world anymore'.

Analysis of narratives

When dealing with large quantities of qualitative data, such as the 793 narratives collected in RESISTIRÉ, a key concern is how to make the material manageable and accessible. In RESISTIRÉ, this concern was amplified due the focus on producing quick results within the project. We were studying the pandemic as it was happening, and the research findings were used to inform the co-creative efforts aimed at finding solutions to issues identified (see Chapter 4). For those reasons alone, reporting the narratives in the standardised manner described above was of considerable benefit. It meant that the narratives could easily be collated into a narrative database in Excel, and because of the classification work already performed by the national researchers, one could quickly get an overview of the material. It also allowed for some basic quantitative analysis that was useful for describing the material even though it had limited value in terms of generalisability due to the non-probability sample.

However, the narratives are first and foremost *qualitative* material. In this sense too, the national researchers had already performed an essential part of the analysis but the task of making sense of the narrative collection as a whole remained. Within RESISTIRÉ, three reports on qualitative indications of inequality were produced (Axelsson et al., 2021; Sandström et al., 2022, 2023). Indications were gathered from the narrative interviews as well as other sources of qualitative data, and in these reports, we opted for a thematic analysis. In this work too, the classification work already done by the national researchers was of great help. In the first cycle, the report was structured around the policy domains listed above. When the narrative data file was imported into NVivo, the software used to code the data, the narratives could easily be sorted into categories based on the policy domains that the national researcher had deemed relevant. These categories overlapped considerably as one narrative could be relevant to more than one domain, but it made coding more efficient. For example, in our analysis of the gender pay and pension gap, we could focus on the twenty-nine narratives most relevant to the domain instead of reading through all 188 first cycle narratives. Within each

policy domain, the main aim of the analysis was to identify obstacles (problems complicating everyday life during the pandemic) and enablers (ways of resisting, managing, and coping with these problems) at the individual level. We also took note of structural factors that hindered or enabled the narrators in their everyday life during the pandemic. Once coded, these obstacles and enablers were clustered into broader themes. In the second cycle, the analysis was conducted similarly, but in this cycle, we paid closer attention to *who* was speaking, connecting obstacles and enablers to the intersecting inequality grounds. As the first two cycles were essentially a scoping exercise aimed at mapping inequalities during the pandemic, conducting the analysis in the way just outlined was a pragmatic choice. Admittedly, the picture produced was painted in quite broad brushstrokes and some of nuance and depth were lost in the process, but it enabled us to deliver results relatively quickly. Results that were meaningful in their own right as a snapshot of pandemic life from marginalised perspectives, and as a vital input in other parts of the project.

The third cycle added a focus on agency and the research questions were refined. We asked: What kind of agency is practiced, or available to practice, by individuals in marginalised positions? What enables and what hinders strategic agency? The analytical approach in this cycle was more theoretically ambitious and using Lister's (2021) taxonomy of agency allowed us to tease out nuances in the material in a way that was not possible with the 'broad strokes' approach of the first two cycles. Again, the work done by the national researchers proved helpful. The narratives in this cycle had been constructed with the overarching theme of agency in mind, and the national researchers had also categorised the narratives according to the form(s) of agency they found most fitting. This categorisation was less clear-cut than in previous cycle, however, as the boundaries between the different forms of agency sometimes blurred. In that sense, the analysis in the final cycle was more demanding as it required a different level of reflexivity around interpretation than previous cycles. The initial coding process looked at each form of agency separately and centred around the question: what challenges did the narrators face and, more importantly, how did they respond to them? Sometimes this process led to reclassifying narratives, either as a different form altogether or as 'hybrid' forms. As an example, that takes the story element into account, as a person gets better at getting by, at some point in their story they might find they have 'got out' of their difficulty. The second stage of the analysis addressed the question of why some barely got by, whereas others managed to turn the pandemic into a catalyst for positive change that enabled

strategic action. This meant moving beyond looking at the forms of agency in isolation to identify structures that constrained the actions of some but not others and the resources available to those that 'got out' or 'got organised'.

Brief reflections from using narratives in RESISTIRÉ

Before moving to the next section, it is worth reiterating that this is but one way of conducting narrative research. One of the more novel aspects of the RESISTIRÉ approach to narrative methods is the large sample used. Although narrative interview samples vary in size, a systematic review of 560 qualitative studies report sample sizes between one and ninety-five participants (Mason, 2010), indicating that the sample used in RESISTIRÉ is exceptionally large. The number of participants per country is more in line with conventional standards, but it is the union of the thirty countries that created the added value of RESISTIRÉ. The project's approach to recurrent narrative collection (in the three research cycles) also deviates from more commonly used longitudinal narrative research. This is generally done through the trajectory approach which explores change over time for an individual or a small group of individuals (Grossoehme & Lipstein, 2016). RESISTIRÉ data collection had some elements of this as some of the interviewees in the third cycle had been interviewed in the first or second cycle. However, the main approach used was a recurrent cross-sectional analysis that explored changes at different time points during the pandemic but at the level of the entire study sample. A final novelty worth mentioning is that the project was conducted in a spirit of pragmatism, using a mixed methods approach that fit the problem under study instead of strictly adhering to methodological dogmas. In the narrative collection, this can be seen in the willingness to depart from 'pure' narrative methods when required by the objectives of the project. For example, by conducting a thematic rather than a narrative analysis, and by including more semi-structured elements in the third cycle. Relating to this pragmatic approach, and to the recurrent data collection that in some sense enabled it, is the abductive reasoning guiding our narrative approach: the interplay between theory, method and data was not fixed but was allowed to shift and change as the project evolved.

The chapter now turns to discussing how narratives were used during the RESISTIRÉ project with a particular focus on the development of personas.

Using narratives within the framework of solution-oriented research

The Open Studio approach constitutes an essential co-creation step in the project's process, with results from the consecutive research cycles being interpreted in this multidisciplinary format (see Chapter 3). As such, one of the main tools used in the Open Studios are/were personas, a well-established research technique where rich sets of qualitative data about users' goals and experiences are synthesised into user archetypes often used in design processes (Madsen et al., 2014).

The personas methodology was developed to communicate information about target users among project team members (Cooper, 1999; Cooper et al., 2007; Nielsen, 2010; Pruitt & Adlin, 2010). Personas are described as 'fictional, detailed archetypal characters that represent grouping of behaviours, goals and motivations observed and identified during the research phase' (Calde et al., 2002). They represent people who have their own stories, share common behavioural or physical characteristics, goals, frustrations, preferences, and other similar specificities (Cooper, 2007). In theory, personas provide an engaging description of the users' needs and wants in the form of another human being (Goodwin & Cooper, 2009; Hill et al., 2017). Pruitt and Adlin (2006) assert that storytelling makes personas work; for example, when we create a short anecdote to imagine how our persona might interact, we are creating a story that shows the persona in action. When applied to the decision-making context, personas provide human context for policymakers to discuss experiences and backgrounds different from their own (Miaskiewicz et al., 2008). In design processes, such as the Open Studios used in RESISTIRÉ, personas are used to visualise the expectations, experiences and needs of different user groups (Pruitt & Grudin, 2003). Their purpose is to bridge the gap between designers and the intended users to design solutions that suit the intended users/beneficiaries.

Personas emerging from the narratives: The creation process

This section discusses personas as they were used within RESISTIRÉ (see Denis & Strid, 2024; Strid & Denis, 2024). The personas were constructed from the narratives and are an example of how narratives were used in the project and of how narratives may be used outside of RESISTIRÉ. Personas were used in every Open Studio (see Chapter 3). Each Open Studio had a different thematic focus that reflected a particular important topic that emerged

from preceding phases of the research, including the analysis of policy and civil society responses to the pandemic (Cibin et al., 2021, 2022, 2023) a, the workshops, expert interviews and narrative interviews (Axelson et al., 2021; Sandström et al., 2022, 2023). Constructed from the narratives, the personas profiled different archetypes of people that were affected by policy responses to the pandemic.

The team in charge of analysing the narratives was briefed in the first cycle on the OS method and process, as well as the personas. The personas were developed in two steps: firstly, the basic characteristics of at least six personas for each open studio were defined and the consistency and the coverage of inequalities were checked. Secondly, drafts for each set of personas were developed, including the choice of visuals and the development of quotes (inspired by real quotes in the narratives). These personas served as archetypes of vulnerable people affected by policy responses to COVID-19, with vulnerability understood as the situation of difficulty experienced by a person or group resulting from intersecting inequality grounds, such as sex, gender, social class/socioeconomic background, age, disability, nationality, ethnicity, religion/belief, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Difficulty entails disadvantaged access to goods, services, and policies that hinder the individual's well-being and lead to a pervasive sense of uncertainty regarding their future. These representations of a real person were used in the Open Studios to promote collaborative reflection on the risk factors and protective factors involved in these stories. The personas were used during the open studio, as a tool to stimulate creativity, to create empathy and to create a deep understanding of the personal experiences and needs of those who experienced difficulties during the pandemic. Reflecting on and engaging with the personas led to the identification of actions, resources, mechanisms and policies for protection and action in relation to the specific issue reflected in the specific persona deemed appropriate for that particular Open Studio. The questions that promoted reflection were: 'What/who would have made a difference for this persona? What would have been their better story? What kinds of support mechanisms, resources or actions would have helped them? What would the participants have done if they found themselves in a similar situation?' The discussion and reflection that arose led to the identification of additional gaps and opportunities and/or ideas for action.

Below is an example of a persona that was used in an Open Studio which focused on young people in education during and beyond the pandemic.

EVA

Age: 16
Nationality: Spanish
Family situation: Single, no children
Profession: Secondary school student

📍 VALLADOLID, SPAIN

CURRENT SITUATION

Eva is a 16-year-old high school student who lives with her parents in a house in Valladolid. She has been experiencing difficulties both at school and at home since before the pandemic, in large part due to her sexual orientation. Eva is a lesbian and this has made her the target of bullying, mostly by other girls and by some boys, both in the school and online. Her parents are not supportive of her. As a result, she is struggling heavily with her mental health and feels very isolated, having only one friend who listens to her and tries to help her out. This situation has affected her grades as well.

PRE-COVID

Eva enrolled in her current school in the semester before the pandemic broke out. She struggled to fit in, though she did make one good friend. It was around the same time that she realised she was romantically interested in girls as opposed to boys and, after a few months, she confessed to the girl she was interested in. This girl, however, did not reciprocate Eva's feelings and started to spread rumours about her LGBTQ status, leading to bullying and exclusion from her classmates. When her parents, who generally are indifferent to her life and are usually absent, found out, they disapproved of her and did not do anything to help her.

DURING LOCKDOWN

When the national lockdown commenced, Eva was initially relieved to be away from her school, although she still had to spend more time with her parents. She was able to follow lessons remotely in relative peace, until her bullies started to send hateful messages her way through social media. While she tried to get her teachers to protect her and provided them these messages as proof, they either did not think it was worth their effort or that she was lying and had faked the messages. Eva did not know whether they were aware of her being a lesbian.

BARRIERS

Eva does not have a social network that she can rely upon and her mental health is in such a state that she is anxious and distrustful about reaching out to people or organisations that could help her. She thinks that graduating as soon as possible is the best solution, but that will still take two years and her grades have been suffering as of late.

POSITIVE EXPERIENCE FROM COVID

Eva liked the temporary reprieve from classroom education that Covid granted her, though this was quickly turned around.

IMMEDIATE NEEDS & AMBITION

Eva needs a place where she can be herself and where she is accepted for who she is. Her ambition is to get out of her parents' house as soon as she is able to and move elsewhere, but she has no real plan yet for how to do so. She doesn't really see a solution for her school problems, other than graduating and trying to move on.

SOCIAL NETWORK

Eva has two neglectful parents who are not supportive of her. She has one friend who she sometimes hangs out with, though this is still difficult to do at school.

TELLING QUOTES

"**I don't see a future here for me** and I can't wait to go someplace else. Other than my best friend, there's nothing that could make me stay."

"I want to be done with school as soon as I can, but I have to get my grades up first. **It's hard to focus on that when you're constantly being harassed.**"

Figure 5.1: Example of a persona used in an Open Studio
Source: Project's own creation/work

Narratives and personas – In and beyond the RESISTIRÉ project

We believe that using narratives and personas has many benefits for working within different contexts and with various cohorts beyond the RESISTIRÉ project. These are described below, firstly, using constructivist-based narrative techniques, already common in many disciplines, is of interest to professions that strive to help people, such as health services and social services among others. Unlike other research techniques, narratives focus not so much on what the researcher wants or expects to obtain, but on the person, who narrates their life or situation. In this way, narrative techniques contribute to getting closer to the unique experiences of the narrator thus the narrator becomes the central focus and allows for moving away from other dominant social narratives (Lenette et al., 2015). Secondly, using narratives and personas may lead to generating true empathy, which may be defined as being present for 'other' individuals in intentional, unconditional ways (Eriksson & Englander, 2017). To generate true

empathy, encounters with 'other' individuals is essential, encounters that will elicit an inference of their thoughts and/or feelings (Czaja, 2013, p. 40). Indeed, professionals who engage in learning deeply about a person's experience develop greater empathy and become closer to their deep experiences (Lee et al., 2020). Thus, personas as an ethical model of social practice allow for learning how to develop authentic relationships that promote true listening. Thirdly, narratives and personas can give voice to diversity by illustrating intersectionality (gender+) in people's lived experience. Respect for the narrator and their story is championed in both narratives and personas with the focus being on the narrators' point of view, based on their personal experience(s) and characteristics (age, culture, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, education etc.) (Bowers-Andrews, 2014). Specifically, both narratives and personas highlight the voices that may not otherwise be heard.

Making visible and enabling change

Narratives as a methodological tool and personas enable making visible that change is possible, from which even 'better stories' (see Chapter 9) of responding to crises can become apparent. The persona technique is a powerful tool that promotes collaboration between stakeholders and other agents. The technique as it was used in RESISTIRÉ proved to be an active and effective tool that facilitated the participation and involvement of stakeholders, citizens and professionals from different spheres in the co-creation of innovative solutions by helping to understand human factors that may hinder the quality of the services (Cooper et al., 2007; Caballero et al., 2014). Using personas as a methodological tool may help organisations to overcome biased, often inadequate assumptions about the people they work with. Personas may facilitate the understanding of the narrators needs thus, leading to the design and creation of targeted and personal services (Pruitt & Adlin, 2006). This method yields insights into personal experiences and can function as a 'consciousness raising tool' (Gunnarsson, 2006) that counteracts the tendency for individuals to blame themselves for their circumstances and instead shifts focus to the broader societal forces that shape individual lives. The use of personas in RESISTIRÉ illustrates how the transformation of detailed information about individuals into 'stories' of 'fictional' people which can be easily understood and discussed works in relation to co-creation solution orientated research (Pruitt & Adlin, 2010). In addition, using personas – derived as they were from the narratives in RESISTIRÉ – provides a framework for working with marginalised individuals and cohorts.

Conclusion

This chapter put forward why narratives were chosen as a key methodological tenet of RESISTIRÉ and illustrated that narratives are a rigorous method with the power to show the many intersections present in individuals' lives. By amplifying the voices of those who are often sidelined with their situations reduced to individual failings, narratives can be integral to challenging systems of oppression by making the lived experience understandable and no longer relegated to the margins. This chapter has illustrated how narratives can be used as a vehicle that allows for the experiences of individuals/groups living with the impact of intersecting inequalities to become accessible to those in positions of power. Using narratives and personas enables co-creation processes between stakeholders, policy-makers and society and highlights the importance of a user-centred versus a self-centred perspective. Indeed, narratives are a useful instrument through which to garner complex realities from narrators. Narratives also, can influence and change policy which may lead to change at the policy level and subsequently for individuals/groups (Lyons, 2007). Thus, the discussion put forward in this chapter of how personas were used in RESISTIRÉ has highlighted how to use narratives in solution-oriented research and the benefits of same.

Part of the beauty of the narratives collected during RESISTIRÉ, is that they are still there, and they are open to a range of possibilities in terms of further analysis. This includes the possibility of conducting an analysis more faithful to the narrative approach, that pays closer attention to the stories that are told. The third cycle could be particularly illuminating to analyse as 'pandemic stories' as they follow the arch of the pandemic and end in a society that approaches the post-pandemic. Such an approach would, of course, need to bear in mind that the 'storytelling duties' were shared between the researchers and the narrator. The analysis described in this chapter was also distinctively European in its approach and the limited attention given to national context is a shortcoming that could be addressed in further analysis of the narratives, but the comparability of the national samples presents a challenge in that regard. The recruitment of narrators relied on each national researcher's individual judgment of who was vulnerable within their national context, as well as who they could access through their networks. Even without further analysis, the narratives are documents, rich with insights into how diverse groups of people lived through the pandemic. The short format also makes them accessible to a wide audience, and as this chapter has shown, their potential use spans beyond the academic world. Our discussion of the narrative approach in this chapter, provides an example of 'how' and 'why'

narratives were used in RESISTIRÉ and showed the importance of methodological flexibility particularly regarding data collection and analysis.

Also, noteworthy regarding narrative use during RESISTIRÉ is the longitudinal element – as this project included three cycles it allowed for tracing and considering changes in experiences during the pandemic. Further, the three cycles allowed for a large sample which is unusual when using narratives. Another point of note is connected to the introduction of the 'better story' framework in cycle three. This was a move away from what may be regarded as the 'traditional' doom and gloom focus of research to illuminating how people resisted and found better ways to live during the pandemic. Finally, drawing from our experiences of conducting research during a global pandemic, we argue that future crisis research should be geared towards examining more closely what practices can transform inequality situations, with a focus on both public authorities and policies, together with civil society organisations and marginalised individuals' practices and strategies.

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Methodological innovations and potential for intersectionality within Rapid Assessment Surveys (RAS) and collaborations

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted everyday practices and lives across societies, and this included the ways in which social research was undertaken exploring the experiences and realities of individuals. From a methodological point of view, the pandemic, due to lockdown and social distancing, entailed not only various practical challenges in conducting research but also highlighted ethical issues in research conduct especially in mitigating risks for potential physical harm of both researchers and study participants. The majority of data collection activities had to be adapted to eliminate the need for face-to-face contact, necessitating adjustments with varying degrees of difficulty (Jung et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the pandemic was also seen as an opportunity for revisiting traditional methods that require in person interaction (interviews, focus groups, ethnography), considering ways that research could be done differently or identifying new methods that could serve a similar purpose despite the constraints imposed by the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created opportunities for methodological innovation and creativity in conducting such research. The influence of digitalisation is also evident across academic disciplines with new sub-disciplines and methodologies emerging – such as digital anthropology (Miller & Horst, 2020), digital sociology (Lupton, 2014) and digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016) which enable conducting research remotely. On the contrary, quantitative methods, especially online surveys, have been used for many years allowing for remote research, and thus have been favourably perceived in relation to cost (compared to paper surveys), and in the ability to access participants within a wide geographical reach in a quick and efficient way (van Selm & Jankowski, 2006).

Rapid assessment online surveys have been the primary method adopted to document the pandemic, especially during the first two years of its most acute outbreaks. The specificity of these surveys lies in their reactionary nature; they

are short, small-scale surveys that are rapidly assembled to provide quick insights into a specific disaster or emergency (Espi-Sanchis, 2022). This methodology was especially effective in meeting the demand for policy evidence under time pressure in a constrained environment, allowing for the swift collection of data on large samples across various sectors (see for instance Geldsetzer, 2020; Ramlagan et al., 2021; Gössling et al., 2021). Consequently, a plethora of insights were generated regarding the impact of the pandemic, to the extent that it influenced academic publication dynamics at large (Else, 2020). For instance, academic journals tended to prioritise papers related to COVID-19 and streamline the review processes, often at the expense of other topics, to facilitate the prompt generation of knowledge on this urgent matter (Aviv-Reuven & Rosenfeld, 2021). Regarding this sudden surge in research activity, some authors argue that the pandemic brought about a 'paperdemic' (Dinis-Oliveira, 2020).

The prevalence of the online survey model as a method for investigating the pandemic, coupled with its prioritisation as a research topic, presents an opportunity for methodological innovation for at least two reasons. Firstly, in this context, both secondary data analysis and meta-analysis have proven to be valuable avenues for acquiring comprehensive knowledge about the effects of the pandemic and devising strategies to address them (Warin, 2021; Adom et al., 2020). Often, these methodologies have enlarged the sample size of studies, facilitated the identification and resolution of gaps, and contributed to a better understanding of the variability in certain results or conflicting claims, all in a time- and cost-effective manner (Betthäuser et al., 2023).

Secondly, the extensive utilisation of online surveys created an environment conducive to methodological innovations, as significant efforts were made to overcome their inherent limitations. In order to tackle issues related to generalisability, reliability, and ethical considerations (Sagar et al., 2020; Singh & Sagar, 2021), various strategies have been employed. Protocols for mixed methods in an epidemic context have been developed (Zaghini et al., 2021), self-ethnography has been more broadly adopted (Katila et al., 2020), and there has been an increased use of technology, especially mobile phone-based (Hensen et al., 2021). Scholars have particularly emphasised the necessity of accessing marginalised groups, as they are more challenging to reach, especially through non-face-to-face methods (Dodds & Hess, 2021; Racionero-Plaza et al., 2021). Some of these researchers even envision the COVID-19 crisis as a significant opportunity for marginalised groups, who could benefit the most from methodological innovations (Dodds et al., 2023).

Building on the above-mentioned literature, this chapter aims to illustrate how the pandemic can be viewed as an opportunity for methodological novelty

through a review of Rapid Assessment Surveys (RAS) across Europe and presenting RAS collaborations as a way forward. More precisely, it demonstrates how this methodology can be used to inform intersectional analysis, i.e., studying how systems of domination are interconnected and generate differentiated experiences across social groups (McCall, 2005). This approach is especially valuable in understanding the effects of COVID-19 in relation to structural inequalities, particularly as further insights are essential for understanding how vulnerable groups have been disproportionately affected by this 'social disaster' (Connell, 2020). Thus, in the next section, we provide a brief overview of rapid assessment methodologies and surveys before we outline the RESISTIRÉ project and the role of the RAS within it. We then summarise the key findings from the RAS and what they showed in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on inequalities. We then review the RAS in relation to which inequalities and policy areas were addressed and, interestingly, who conducted those RAS. Finally, we reflect on the strengths and limitations of the RAS and introduce the RAS collaborations as a methodological innovation that can mitigate some RAS challenges and enhance intersectional analysis.

Rapid assessment methodologies and surveys

Rapid assessment methodologies have been used since the 1980s to provide timely and focused data responding to emergencies. They are often focused on health and medical research and utilised especially for organisations such as the World Health Organisation (Manderson & Aaby, 1992; Hewlett et al., 2005; WHO, 2020) however, slowly, anthropological and sociological foci were introduced (ibid; Espi-Sanchis, 2022). Rapid online surveys are more commonly used as examples of rapid assessment methodologies. According to the International Labour Organisation, rapid online surveys have been increasingly used to collect data which are complementary to traditional employment surveys and have been recognised as a useful tool for assessing the impact of the pandemic on employment and designing recovery actions (Espi-Sanchis, 2022). Furthermore, rapid online surveys have been identified as promising to capture and assess perceptions and awareness of individuals (Geldsetzer, 2020). Rapid online surveys entail both advantages and disadvantages. While their sampling frames and survey design are often limited, they are advantageous in relation to collecting data fast, often remotely, cost- effectively, and in a timely fashion (Espi-Sanchis, 2022).

Similarly to rapid online surveys, we focus on rapid assessment surveys which we consider as surveys (often online) initiated by lobby groups, scientists, and official agencies to provide quick, research-based assessments. We focused on RAS

that were mainly conducted across Europe which was the target of the RESISTIRÉ project to provide useful and quick insights into the impact of COVID-19 in different European countries. During the pandemic, RAS were able to tap into their flexibility as fast data collection instruments which allowed for some innovation. For example, some RAS altered survey questions and design to capture emergent information needs. Some introduced several waves of data collection providing continuous data in a safe and cost-effective way (Harroche et al., 2023). This flexibility, along with the fact that most of the RAS were small-scale and specifically focused, allowed for the RESISTIRÉ team to pursue collaboration and inform their design and/or analysis from an intersectional perspective. Often, RAS are criticised for their samples in terms of both framing and size (often small), brief questionnaires and survey design (ILO, 2020). Another limitation is bias towards capturing some groups more than others, as people such as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds or who might not have access to a phone or an electronic device struggle to engage (Espi-Sanchis, 2022; Brubaker et al., 2021; Discenza & Walsh, 2021).

This book outlines innovations conducted during the RESISTIRÉ project that future researchers, practitioners and policy-makers could take inspiration from. This chapter focuses on the RAS as an important method in capturing national rapid insights into inequalities in comparative cross-country research across Europe during the pandemic. Thus, it contributes towards understanding better how RAS during the pandemic covered particular themes and groups while others were overlooked. It will do this by looking not only at the content but also at who conducted the RAS and what this means for including or excluding communities when researching the impact of the pandemic. It also provides recommendations about what can be done better in the future when we design RAS and what innovations we can explore to make them more intersectional and impactful.

The RESISTIRÉ project: A brief introduction

The aim of the RESISTIRÉ project was to understand the unequal impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak and its policy responses on behavioural, social, and economic inequalities in thirty countries (EU 27 minus Malta – hereinafter EU26 – plus Iceland, UK, Serbia, and Türkiye), and to work towards individual and societal resilience. RESISTIRÉ focused on translating research insights and evidence (policy, qualitative and quantitative data) into practical solutions for addressing gendered challenges that were created and/or exacerbated by the

pandemic. The project was conducted in three cycles, each generating new research results and employing a set of Open Studios.

The RAS in the RESISTIRÉ project

The data were collated by thirty national researchers (NRs) contracted to initially map RAS focusing explicitly on the domains and target groups of interest in the EU27 countries along with Iceland, the UK, Serbia, and Türkiye, from May to July 2021 – the first cycle of RESISTIRÉ. They consisted of researchers and experts in gender studies and inequality studies who were contracted to map the situation in their countries. Nine of the NRs were part of the RESISTIRÉ's partner teams, while the others were identified through a network of professional connections among members of the consortium. NRs received training through written guidelines and two 1.5-hour online briefing sessions, which outlined their role and the tasks they needed to complete.

The NRs were requested to deliver two types of output: (1) identify ten local RAS that focus explicitly on the policy domains and target groups of interest and (2) summarise which inequalities and domains have been addressed or omitted at a national level. NRs were asked to complete a 'RAS grid' of seventeen questions (a combination of closed and open-ended) for each of the ten RAS they identified. These grids provided information on the authors of the RAS, methodology, respondents, key findings and which domains and inequalities were addressed (see Stovell et al., 2021). NRs were asked to map RAS that identify, measure, and monitor the economic, social and/or environmental impacts of COVID-19-related policies, with a particular focus on the target groups within the eight domains identified above. NRs reviewed RAS that existed both prior to COVID-19, and had subsequently added a COVID-19 lens, and also searched for new studies from Higher Education Institutions, NGOs, state agencies, marketing groups and think tanks that discussed the pandemic in relation to inequalities. These studies were usually found through a desk-based internet search, or in some cases, through pre-existing knowledge of the studies themselves. If many RAS were identified, NRs were advised to focus on RAS that they considered as quite novel. These RAS were mainly based on primary data collection, while in some cases they alternatively provided an analysis of existing (secondary) datasets. Researchers were asked to prioritise RAS using primary data. In the first cycle, the RAS mapping was exploratory and aimed at getting a snapshot of the types of RAS conducted in relation to COVID-19 across different countries involved in this project. It was not intended to provide an exhaustive list of all available RAS.

Once RAS grids had been filled out, the NRs completed a country report, which guided them in summarising the inequalities, target groups and domains that were addressed by the mapped RAS and identifying which were missing.

Between May–July 2021, the NRs produced 291 RAS grids and twenty-nine country reports (a country report for Estonia was not completed). Although ten RAS from each country were requested, and in most cases were delivered, some NRs delivered more and others less (ranging from three–thirteen). A full table of the 291 mapped RAS is included in the project report (Stovell et al., 2021). Frequency tables and graphs were created from closed-end questions to provide an overall picture of the RAS that had been mapped.

Further analyses of the RAS were completed across the three different cycles: the first cycle focused on policy domains, the second on inequality grounds and the third on longitudinal perspectives. In this chapter we focus mainly on the first cycle where most of the RAS grids were collected. In the second cycle, NRs provided an update of the RAS and in the third cycle they focused on updating the information of the longitudinal RAS.

In the first cycle after the collection of the 291 RAS grids, further analysis was conducted from a policy domain perspective, focusing on open-ended questions on target groups, main topics, and findings. The RAS were thoroughly analysed by the research team leading the quantitative insights to identify commonalities and key studies. Open-ended questions from country summary reports were coded thematically under the categories of 'prominence of gender'; 'inclusion of intersectionality'; 'which inequalities'; 'which domains' and 'what's missing'. Country reports were divided up among the researchers and the material identified under each code was discussed and analysed collaboratively to identify commonalities and discrepancies.

What did RAS tell us in relation to the pandemic

The first cycle of analysis examined differential impact across policy domains (that fall within the EU strategy on gender equality) including work and the labour market, the economy, the gender pay, and pension gap, the gender care gap, gender-based violence, decision-making and politics, human and fundamental rights, and environmental justice. In regard to work and labour market, it was found that women had a markedly lower participation in the labour market during the pandemic, and unemployment tended to cluster around sectors of the economy which were particularly hit by the restrictive measures taken by governments to stop the spread of COVID-19. The largest differences in both employment and unemployment rates were however related to educational level

rather than gender, and lower rates of employment were reported by younger, less educated, and foreign-born workers. In exploring gender pay and pension gaps during the pandemic, RAS found that the greatest impacts on women's income and employment were primarily linked to women's increased caring duties due to offices and schools closing, which was worse among lone parents, however government emergency welfare schemes, such as furlough and increased extraordinary childcare leave were important to help mitigate the worst effects on incomes. Regarding care, many of the reviewed Rapid Assessment Surveys indicated that women took on most care responsibilities and were particularly burdened with home-schooling, which was associated with negative consequences on women's performance at work, work-life balance, and mental health. It was also found that during the pandemic, intimate partner violence against women and girls increased.

More broadly, research on individual decision-making indicated that respondents lost trust in governments and mass media as sources of information on the virus, and many marginalised communities were not included in decision-making bodies for governmental COVID-19 responses, meaning that there were severe oversights and a worsening of inequalities. Overcrowding was found to be much higher for the poorest share of the population in all countries under analysis, which increased the risk of infection and put a higher burden on the wellbeing of those who had to transition to teleworking. As a result, working parents in the lowest income quintile were identified as a particularly high-risk group. COVID-19 severely stressed hospitals and healthcare systems, with the postponement of most non-urgent care, decreasing access to quality care especially for the most disadvantaged. Health and wellbeing declined during the COVID-19 pandemic, aligning with broader findings regarding reduced access to health services as a result of increased pressure on healthcare systems and the negative consequences of isolation on mental wellbeing.

In cycle two, RESISTIRÉ examined the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) communities, young/older people, single parents, and migrants/refugees/asylum seekers during the pandemic. This focus on the inequality grounds of age, relationship status, nationality, sexual orientation, and gender identity emanated from observations in the first cycle showing a limited understanding about the experiences of these particular groups. Regarding sexuality and gender identity, it was found that there was an increased risk of mental health issues especially among young people, as well as family rejection and severe healthcare inequalities that further marginalised LGBTQ+ communities. For young people and the elderly, particular difficulties were felt in relation to economic stability, education, mental health, and care provision. Both groups

faced increased financial insecurity and job losses; young people, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, struggled with distance learning and both younger and older people experienced instances of stress, anxiety and depression more than the rest of the population. Single parents were found to be at an increased risk of poverty and job insecurity and experienced a marked reduction in their physical and mental wellbeing. Migrants were found to be at an increased risk of COVID-19 infection due to conditions at their workplace and home. They were also more likely to experience financial insecurity through job loss and reduced income, and in addition a worsening of mental wellbeing and severe inequalities regarding education and health.

In the third cycle, which focused on the longitudinal RAS, analysis showed that the pandemic reinforced inequalities that were already present. In particular, there was evidence that economic disparities and gender inequalities were worsened during the crisis. Many RAS however pointed to the emergence of new inequalities. Accessing digital resources and knowing how to use them was a key issue during lockdowns impeding elderly populations' access to information, services, and social contacts, as well as the ability for working-class children and students to attend classes. Different RAS showed that language inequalities acted as barriers to accessing public services and benefits for those with a lower level of literacy or from a migrant background.

Despite these findings, a comprehensive gender+ approach was often lacking with no specific attention paid to intersecting inequality grounds. Compared to other inequality grounds, there was a marginal focus in the RAS regarding race, with only three surveys specifically analysing the differing effects of the pandemic on non-white individuals. Few surveys discussed sexuality and gender identity and point to a clear omission of data on these issues across Europe, which is presented in the next section in more detail.

Reviewing and reflecting on the RAS

The vast majority of the 291 RAS consisted of primary datasets and only thirty-four used existing secondary data. Most were one-off studies, although ninety-three were identified as having longitudinal dimensions. The studies employed various sampling methodologies, including quota sampling and random sampling, and ranged in size from less than 100 responses to approximately 50,000 responses. Those with a substantial number of responses were prioritised for further analysis and collaborations.

Which policy domains did the RAS address?

A central part of the RAS mapping exercise was identifying which of the eight key domains the surveys addressed. Figure 6.1 shows how often each domain was represented and indicates that Work and Labour Market and Human Rights were the two most common domains covered by the RAS. When 'other' was selected as a domain type, responses included attitudes and values, mental health, access to education and access to technology, suggesting overlap with the Human Rights domain. When considering these figures, it is important to note that the connection between a RAS and the domains was sometimes limited or implicit. RAS which focused specifically on each domain are identified in the following sections.
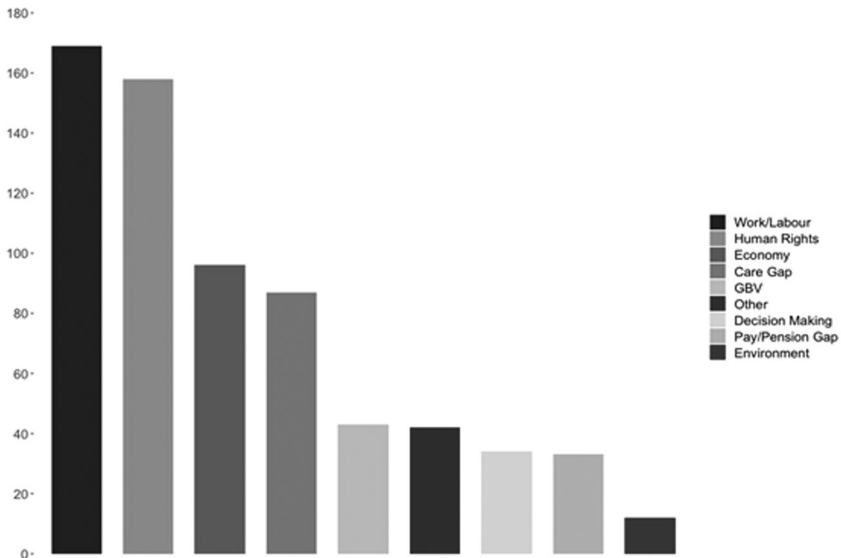

Figure 6.1: Number of RAS addressing key policy domains
Source: Project's own creation/work

Which inequality grounds did the RAS address?

The RAS mapping involved identifying whether different forms of inequality were captured in the surveys. The most common inequality grounds identified in

the RAS were sex/gender, age, and socio-economic status (Figure 6.2). However, although sex and/or gender were included as a variable in the majority of RAS, this did not necessarily mean that findings were examined through a gender+ lens and gendered analysis was often lacking.
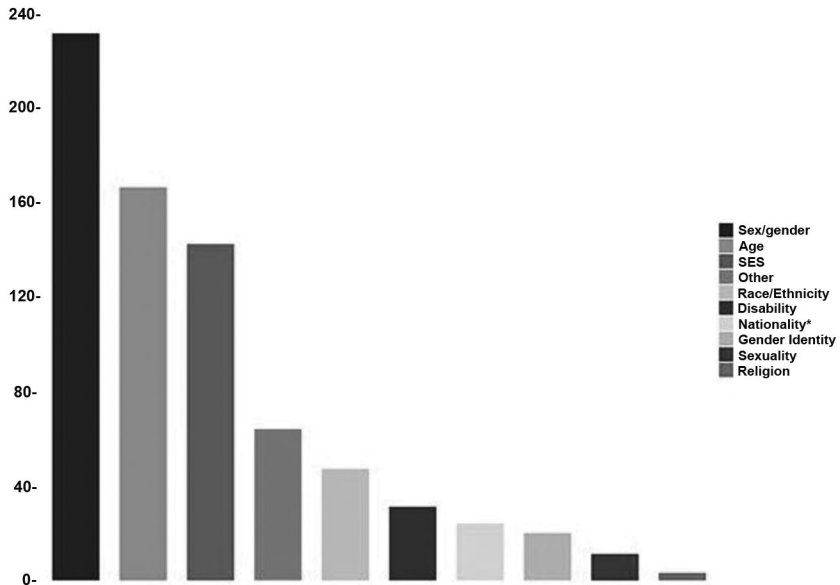

Figure 6.2: Number of RAS addressing different inequality grounds

Source: Project's own creation/work

Some versions of the RAS reporting form did not include Nationality among the listed inequality grounds and so the frequency of this form of inequality is likely to be underestimated.

A small proportion of the RAS captured information in relation to ethnicity/race, disability, nationality, gender identity, sexuality, and religion. It should be noted that in some RAS more than one inequality ground was reported, therefore some of the RAS have been counted more than once as reflected in the figure.

Who conducted the RAS?

Most RAS were conducted by Higher Education Institutions and NGOs (Figure 6.3), while other author types identified by the NRs included independent research organisations, trade unions, management consultancies, businesses,

banks, or financial institutions, market research organisations, international agencies (e.g., UN, EU etc.) and, the police.
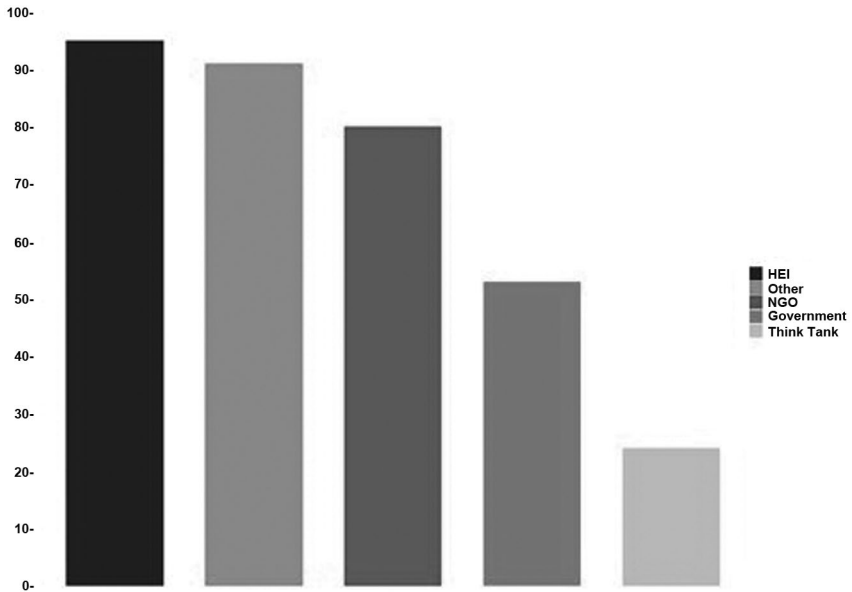

Figure 6.3: Number of RAS according to author type
Source: Project's own creation/work

Across all inequality grounds, Higher Education Institutions were most likely to have conducted RAS, followed by NGOs. Governmental organisations and think tanks were least likely to have conducted RAS regarding inequalities, and very often focused on only one inequality ground leading to a lack of ability to utilise their data for intersectional analysis. Overall, gender identity and sexuality were very poorly represented in the RAS but were mostly conducted by NGOs for sexuality (although this is based on a small number of RAS (ten– eighteen), and Higher Education Institutions for gender identity. The Table 6.1 below shows how different type of RAS authors captured information around inequalities.

Table 6.1: Type of RAS authors capturing different inequality grounds

Inequality ground (Number of RAS where the inequality ground was represented)	HEIs	NGOs	Other	Government al organisations	Think tanks
Sex/gender (240)	32%	23.8%	22.5%	15.8%	5.8%
Age (166)	36.9%	21.9%	17.5%	20%	3.8%
Socioeconomic situation (143)	36.4%	23.1%	19.6%	14.7%	6.3%
Race/ethnicity (43)	32.6%	27.9%	23.3%	14%	2.3%
Other (38)	15.8%	21.1%	39.5%	18.4%	5.3%
Disability (32)	37.5%	28.1%	21.9%	9.4%	3.1%
Nationality (24)	25%	20.8%	25%	16.7%	12.5%
Gender identity (18)	55.6%	38.9%		5.6%	
Sexuality (10)	30% – 3 RAS	60% – 6 RAS		10% -1 RAS	
Religion (5)	60%- 3 RAS	20%- 1 RAS		20%- 1 RAS	

These findings suggest that RAS are being conducted by various stakeholders, with Higher Education Institutions and NGOs being the main bodies in collecting and analysing information on inequalities and the effects of COVID-19. In some cases, NGOs, due to the vital role they played in addressing the needs of vulnerable groups (Cibin et al., 2023) – where government responses failed during the pandemic – were better placed to engage with these communities and capture the voices and experiences of marginalised groups.

Strengths and weaknesses of the RAS

Overall, the RAS provided us with helpful and quick insights into the impact of COVID-19 on inequalities across Europe. They highlighted the need for more data in relation to race, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity in order to better understand the full impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups in Europe, such as young people, senior citizens, single parents, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and LGBTQ+ communities.

As a methodological tool that could be administered during the pandemic and even in times of lockdown, RAS were able in some instances – especially where they were longitudinal – to take advantage of their flexible and dynamic character as fast data collection instruments. More specifically, the research design of many longitudinal RAS changed over time regarding their key focus, recruitment strategies, target populations, additional questions, and data collection methods. Several RAS changed the content of their surveys in subsequent waves or added supplementary questions in response to their changing national, social, and political environments. For example, surveys altered or added questions in relation to vaccine availability, government interventions (for instance, introduction of masks and social distancing) and governmental policies (for instance, education and work such as home schooling and work-at-home guidance). Other studies altered their focus in light of contemporary events and included additional questions that allowed participants to reflect on their opinions and experiences of inflation, the cost of living and the war in Ukraine. These characteristics were particularly important in pursuing and undertaking RAS collaborations.

On the other hand, a key challenge for RAS is that due to their nature of providing fast paced responses, in some cases the authors did not have the time or the resources to analyse further or sufficiently in-depth regarding inequality data.

It was evident that while many RAS were conducted and financial and human resources were allocated to their design and implementation, these RAS could have been better designed and operationalised. A key limitation that we discovered across the RAS was the absence of an intersectional approach from the design to the analysis stage. First, in relation to design, most RAS included variables in relation to sex/gender, age and socio-economic background but other parameters were not included which did not allow for the collection of important information. Non-binary data were rarely collected by RAS but also by cross-national European surveys – that we also analysed along with the RAS – which prevented researchers addressing distinctions between gender identity, sexuality, and sex. In some cases, surveys seemed to take a deficit perspective to collecting data on inequalities focusing on risk factors and disadvantages, while overlooking

positive aspects like religiosity or social support, which can help mitigate vulnerability (Harroche et al., 2023)

Second, and more disappointingly was that even when various information was collected, the analysis was often limited to single focus on gender, age, or other parameters, overlooking opportunities to carry out intersectional analysis. In some cases, when RAS set out to collect such information there were scarce responses from hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups which limited further intersectional analysis.

Utilising strengths and addressing challenges of the RAS: The RAS collaborations

The RESISTIRÉ project envisaged utilising these RAS even further. Apart from engaging with some RAS authors to feed their insights and co-create solutions as part of our Open Studios (see Chapter 3), we also identified some RAS to develop close collaborations. NRs were instrumental in helping us identifying these RAS. NRs were asked to select three key RAS which they considered as promising within their country. Criteria for this selection included the following: the nature of the research design and analysis; a longitudinal character; consideration of gender and gender+ approaches; having made a tangible impact; larger sample size; broad in scope. However, as the RAS analysis showed, there was potential for more analysis on inequalities and for better intersectional analysis – especially where relevant data was collected. Therefore, it was decided that the project should extend beyond merely sharing existing findings, to instead actively engage in the development of new research activities. Thus, seven RAS collaborations were established with the authors of some of the most promising RAS across different European countries, covering a range of topics and inequality grounds (see Table 6.2). Researchers at Oxford Brookes University, who led on the collection of the RAS surveys, actively collaborated with the researchers of the chosen RAS, and began discussions as to how best to introduce intersectionality in their study. Depending on the subject focus of the study and the geographical location where the RAS was conducted, the consortium partners were sometimes involved to pursue initial contact and provide subject focused expertise. A small financial incentive was provided to the RAS authors to get research assistance or 'buy out' some of their time from other activities to allow these collaborations to be established and lead to new outputs. In some cases, data that had already been collected was able to be further analysed through an intersectional lens to gain new insights into inequalities during the pandemic. In studies that were ongoing, RAS authors were supported to create new survey

questions that engaged with inequalities and intersectional characteristics on a deeper level, allowing a more holistic picture within their sample and, more broadly, the country in which they were conducting research. In Türkiye, a collaboration with a LGBTIQ+ charity – which had conducted a successful RAS with the LGBTQ+ community – allowed for the creation of a *Handbook for Conducting Intersectional Research*, which could be used by other organisations to conduct better, more inclusive research in the future.

Table 6.2: Overview of RAS collaborations

Country where the RAS took place	Focus of the RAS	Brief findings	Collaboration led to
Netherlands	Gender pay and pension gaps	No significant gender discrepancy regarding the ability to earn a stable income, to contribute to pensions, and to save during the pandemic – a 'better story' that reminds us that gendered inequalities are avoidable	New survey questions added
UK	Health workers	Women healthcare workers experienced more burnout than men, with violence, especially from patients and relatives, increasing burnout. Care responsibilities were associated with burnout, especially amongst older workers.	New survey questions added
Spain	Teleworking	Increased hours at home for men and women didn't alter the feminisation of domestic and care tasks.	New survey questions added
Belgium (+cross-national)	Gender identity	Negative impacts on access to trans healthcare during the pandemic, highlighting a need for more support, more educated healthcare providers, and shortened waiting lists in an informed consent healthcare model.	New gender+ analysis of existing survey questions

Country where the RAS took place	Focus of the RAS	Brief findings	Collaborati on led to
Türkiye	LGBTQ+/s exuality	Guidance to researchers, academics, and professionals working with LGBTIQ+ communities on applying gender+ and intersectional approaches to research.	Handbook for inclusive intersectiona l research
Czechia	Family life and partnerships	Gendered inequalities in how household work and childcare were distributed in Czech couples during the pandemic. Women (especially those with lower education) did most of the childcare and housework. The distribution of household work was associated with feelings of relationship satisfaction and dissatisfaction – those who did most of the work (which were women in most cases) were less satisfied with their partnerships.	New gender+ analysis of existing survey questions
Belgium	Intersection al mental health	Decrease over time (between April 2020 and June 2022) in the proportion of people reporting anxiety across all intersectional groups. A higher proportion of anxiety among young people is reported with the role of sex on anxiety seemed to fade over time, while the relationship of education and age with anxiety seemed to become stronger over time during the course of the pandemic.	New gender+ analysis of existing survey questions

Source: Project's own creation/work

The RAS collaboration approach varied in relation to the stage of the data collection and the variables collected on inequalities. Depending on the stage of data collection, these collaborations were designed to either incorporate survey questions for the systematic collection of sociodemographic data related to various inequality grounds simultaneously – such as gender identity, sexual orientation, trans status, ethnic background, and disability – or conduct additional analyses

to explore particular questions more in depth and/or through an intersectional lens. These collaborations contributed to producing valuable insights on topics such as gender pay and pension gaps, the domestic division of labour, resilience, transgender individuals' healthcare needs, and the experiences of frontline workers during the pandemic. Furthermore, they provided methodological insights for designing and conducting research to understand intersectional inequalities. For example, most of the RAS collaborators often interpreted our request for intersectionality as additional cross-tabulations across two or more inequality grounds or conducting regression and interaction analysis. However, these types of analysis were limited for capturing multiple inequalities to the extent that multilevel intersectional modelling allows for considering contextual variables (Humbert, 2024) which required greater statistical skills, expertise, and time. Thus, we saw the RAS as a starting point for these collaborators to embark upon considering intersectionality within their current – and hopefully their future – research which still provided some new insights. We envisage that through these collaborations, researchers will start to consider intersectionality across all stages of research from the inception stage (when formulating ideas and research questions to deciding on methodologies) using the methods developed in the Gendered Innovations Reports (European Commission, 2013, 2020).

Establishing these collaborations not only cross-fertilised research projects but also fostered cooperation among authors from diverse backgrounds with the RESISTIRÉ team providing expertise and support to colleagues applying a gender and/or an inclusive lens through their analysis. This initiative led to the development of research networks and the promotion of alliances between academic and non-academic sectors, as some of the RAS were conducted by civil society organisations. These RAS collaborations led to new data being collected but also new data analysis and reporting that made us understand better the impact of COVID-19 on inequalities.

We thus consider the RAS collaborations as an innovative approach to mitigate existing limitations of secondary data sources such as RAS, enhance the production of knowledge in a more inclusive way, and nurture and support the development of more intersectional approaches in survey design, data collection and analysis. The flexibility and speed that RAS can adapt lends itself to establishing collaborations and reshaping RAS tools. Compared to large national or cross-national secondary datasets, these were often relatively small-scale studies with a specific focus, undertaken from university researchers and NGOs which also allowed the RESISTIRÉ team to collaborate and inform the design and/or analysis of the RAS. In addition, due to the nature of these RAS on COVID-19 capturing inequality data and often marginalised communities, there was

willingness to collaborate and consider different perspectives. Longitudinal RAS were particularly useful for the collaborations since they provided opportunities and space – especially when the timing of the collaboration coincided with the design of the next wave – to co-develop questions and answer options with the RAS authors.

More importantly, the RAS collaborations have highlighted the importance of building not only interdisciplinary networks but more importantly intersectoral networks since NGOs and CSOs can play a pivotal role in accessing and engaging hard to reach communities compared to the ivory tower of academia. To illustrate this, we provide two summaries of the RAS collaborations we undertook.

Deustobarometer case study, Spain: A RAS collaboration example

The collaboration of the University of Deusto's Social Deustobarometer (DBSoc) with the RESISTIRÉ project was suggested on the basis that it collected detailed information about the gendered impact of working from home and the adoption of domestic chores and caring responsibilities during the COVID-19 lockdown.

DBSoc is a survey using panel methodology conducted by an interdisciplinary team of researchers since 2013, providing the potential to explore and monitor how perceptions and social situations of participants evolve over time. It consists of a questionnaire with a core set of questions about economic, political, and social welfare issues and a variable section of questions that include topics of short-term interest. The panel sample consists of 1,000 respondents with two annual waves, one in the summer and a second in the winter. The findings are published on the website[1] and presented to the media at a press conference. Being an online sample, it provides quick access to data every six months. It enables us to study trends and also gives us the opportunity to modify part of the questionnaire to introduce current issues of interest. In general terms, a rapid longitudinal interpretation of the last decade of the DBSoc shows that since 2013, social and economic inequality has persisted. Around 20% of the population report making serious adjustments to their household finances, and this has not changed. These adjustments take place in both periods of crisis and economic growth. The majority of people who say that they make these adjustments to their household budget are women. In terms of access to employment, there is a clear difference

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1   www.barometrosocial.deusto.es last accessed 19 March 2024

according to age. Younger people find it more difficult to access employment and, above all, to keep it.

Following the COVID-19 survey, a somewhat more critical perception of remote working was identified, especially among women, who reported a negative impact on their work-life balance. As a result of the RAS collaboration, we were able to conduct an in-depth analysis on perceptions of how remote working relates to the undertaking of household chores and caring responsibilities during the pandemic. The aim was to analyse if gender bias existed and if remote working could become another means of perpetuating gender roles in the home and, thus, have undesirable effects on equality between men and women. We thus found that from a gender perspective, telework is perceived differently by men and women and the gender+ lens allows us to confirm the rigidity of this division of labour and how it perpetuates gender inequality at the intersections of work and care. According to this study, men perceived the impact of telework more in relation to their performance and productivity while they seemed to overlook the impact it has on women's tasks within the home that have negatively affected their work-life balance. On the contrary, women were more aware of this unintended impact since telework did not provide more time for self-care or undertaking hobbies. The study thus suggested that the pandemic has not challenged the traditional unequal gender division of domestic and childcare duties which seems to have persisted, but, more importantly, in some instances it has exacerbated this unequal burden at the expense of women.

The study offered interesting insights also in relation to age, educational background and socio- economic background (see Harroche et al., 2022). The findings of this survey are in alignment with previous studies (Pateman, 1988; González & Cuenca, 2020; Solanas, 2020) that highlight the difficulty in changing traditional gender roles in relation to domestic and caring responsibilities. This is the situation even when there is a shift in the presence of women and men at home, as was the case when the male unemployment rate increased at the beginning of the financial crisis in 2007 which did not result in them taking on more responsibilities in the home (Beteta, 2013; Kushi & McManus, 2018). While the intersectional impact was also considered as a result of the RAS collaboration, it was not possible to guarantee statistical representativeness in all socio-demographic variables, which limited the extent of intersectional analysis and reporting. However, the RAS collaboration has provided an important opportunity for the DBSoc team to reflect on and identify solutions in how to address such limitations in future waves of the survey.

(SPoD) – Inclusion handbook for researchers using survey methodology, Türkiye

Social Policy, Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Studies Association (SPoD) is an NGO that collaborated with the RESISTIRÉ project to develop a handbook on inclusive and intersectional data collection, drawing on SPoD's experience in this field. Compared to other RAS, this collaboration contributed towards the project's research agenda in relation to intersectional methodological challenges and facilitating factors focusing on data collection and engagement with hard-to-reach groups such as LGBTIQ+. Furthermore, it provided insights into the role that specialised NGOs can play in conducting research on groups that are often difficult to reach.

SPoD is an organisation from Türkiye that aims to contribute to the development of social policies which will allow LGBTIQ+ people in Türkiye to live without feeling oppressed because of their gender identity and sexual orientation. SPoD, in addition to its advocacy work, has been conducting research for many years to reduce gendered inequalities and social exclusion, collecting data on the unique needs of disadvantaged groups (e.g., women, LGBTIQ+ communities etc.) and their problems in accessing various resources (rights, services, goods). An example of their research studies was 'Access of LGBTIQ+ to Social Services During the Pandemic' which was one of the Rapid Assessment Surveys mapped during RESISTIRÉ. This study addressed an important gap in research looking intersectionally at the needs of this marginalised group during the pandemic and is the basis on which this collaboration was built upon.

The handbook provides guidance and support to researchers, academics, and professionals working with LGBTIQ+ communities on applying gender+ and intersectional approaches when collecting, analysing, and presenting data, in a way that avoids reproducing existing inequalities. The handbook provides easily accessible recommendations, based on focus group discussions and interviews with those who conducted SPoD's recent study on access to social services during the pandemic for LGBTIQ+ communities and researchers of two other far- reaching online surveys targeting LGBTIQ+ people in Türkiye.

The handbook outlines key considerations for researchers aiming to conduct inclusive research and provides practical advice on the research process, discussing how research design, research study implementation and research analysis can become more inclusive. Among its suggestions, it is particularly highlighted how inclusive online surveys can contribute immensely to literature on marginalised groups and offers extensive information on how questions on inequalities can be asked in surveys and how intersectional analysis can be better undertaken.

Finally, it also recommends better cooperation between NGOs and academic researchers to conduct inclusive survey research. Academics can be invaluable in providing 'technical expertise', while NGOs can be 'key in helping academics understand, access, and engage marginalised groups' (Yediveren, 2023, p.27)

Conclusions

This chapter has focused on the role of the RAS within the RESISTIRÉ project in offering valuable and timely insights into the impact of COVID-19 on inequalities across Europe. The RAS emerges as a methodological asset particularly suited for swift responses, crucial during crises when traditional face-to-face data collection becomes impractical and broader geographical coverage proves challenging.

Reviewing the RAS, we found that gender/sex data were prominently featured in most RAS, followed by age and socioeconomic background while information about race/ethnicity, disability, nationality, gender identity, sexual orientation and religion were not often captured. Notably, researchers affiliated with higher education institutions spearheaded these surveys, with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) playing a pivotal role in reaching and understanding perspectives from marginalised and hard-to-reach groups. The longitudinal aspect of the RAS yielded manifold benefits, providing prompt insights into the evolving experiences of vulnerable groups throughout the pandemic. Its adaptability in design, data collection methods, survey questions, and target audience facilitated responsiveness to evolving information needs.

However, despite its rapid and flexible nature, we discerned significant untapped potential within the RAS due to challenges in integrating gender and intersectional perspectives into methodological approaches. To harness this potential, we engaged with RAS authors, providing additional resources and expertise in gender and intersectionality to facilitate the collection of new, or explore in depth, existing data sets from a gender and intersectional lens where possible. These collaborations not only encouraged interdisciplinary and interorganisational teamwork but also nurtured capacity for intersectional analysis among RAS researchers, which could prove invaluable for future research endeavours.

A number of lessons are drawn from our experience in the RAS collaborations. First, it is imperative to imbue intersectional perspectives throughout the research process. Mere collection of data across various inequality grounds does not inherently render a study intersectional; it demands deliberate consideration in research design, data capture, analysis, and interpretation. Adequate funding is also indispensable to support this endeavour, enabling rapid yet thorough

exploration of topics through a gender and intersectionality lens. Furthermore, the power of collaboration across disciplinary and sectoral boundaries was critical. NGOs and civil society organisations not only provided crucial support to vulnerable groups during the pandemic but also contributed significantly to research efforts, especially in amplifying voices from marginalised communities often overlooked by traditional research institutions.

As part of the RESISTIRÉ project, we identified more than 300 RAS taking place during the pandemic across many European countries, providing an impressive body of data that helped us and policy stakeholders in understanding better the impact of COVID-19 on inequalities. RAS is not a perfect methodological tool, but it can be immensely powerful and efficient to capture data on inequalities, especially from an intersectional perspective if it is carefully designed, appropriately resourced and given space for interdisciplinary and intersectoral collaboration.

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Doing social research with a network of national researchers: The experience of coordinating collaborative teams in RESISTIRÉ

Introduction

A network of national researchers (NRs) working in 30 European countries was set up within the RESISTIRÉ project, who acted as a large international team forming the backbone of the implementation of the project's research activities.

In addition to providing direct access to contextualised information and insights at national and sub-national levels, a network of national researchers such as the one established in RESISTIRÉ offers advantages in terms of reflection and mutual learning processes among a diverse group of researchers with a wide range of expertise in different research fields (Volkmer, 2012). On the other hand, international collaborations in the social sciences present specific challenges linked to theoretical and methodological diversity, which are even more prominent in international comparative research (Kosmutzky, 2018), while the network's architecture strongly influences its internal dynamics and outcomes (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012).

Indeed, the architecture of the network is one of the key issues that this chapter seeks to explore, as it is an important determinant of the extent to which the potential of a network of national researchers can be realised. The RESISTIRÉ network was characterised by a blend of NRs belonging to the teams participating in the consortium and external NRs contracted by the consortium. This combination, dictated by practical needs related to the nature of the funding, posed several challenges due to the different levels of involvement of the NRs in the overall project. Still, it also led to the testing of an original research architecture, the discussion of which can shed light on some crucial aspects of international collaboration in contemporary social sciences.

This chapter reviews the experience of RESISTIRÉ of working with a large and diverse network of NRs in the context of a funded project and presents and discusses the challenges it faced and how they were addressed. It aims to contribute to the field of Science of Team Science (SciTS) (Croyle, 2008; Stokols et al., 2008; Fiore, 2008, 2013), with a focus on the emerging strand of literature

dealing with international collaborative research in large and geographically dispersed teams (Bozeman & Youtie, 2018; McAlpine et al., 2020; Dusdal & Powell, 2021), and with particular attention to externally funded research projects in the social sciences, which are still recognised as a 'blind spot' in SciTS (Kosmutzky & Wöhlert, 2021, p. 183).

The chapter is structured as follows. After this introduction, section two provides a brief review of the literature on the growing importance of international collaborative research. It also outlines the primary challenges and strategies that have been identified in managing international networks of researchers, with a particular focus on social science projects. Section three outlines the key features of the RESISTIRÉ network of NRs, as well as the coordination tools and processes used to manage the research work. It also presents the results of the ex-post evaluation of the network experience by the NRs. Finally, section four discusses the challenges and opportunities in working with a network like the one established in RESISTIRÉ, along with the lessons learned to improve its functioning in future research projects.

A quick look at international research collaboration

Integrating definitions from various scholars (Hagstrom, 1965; Patel, 1973; Schrage, 1995; Bozeman et al., 2013), Kosmutzky defines a research collaboration as 'a temporary social process in which scholars pool their complementary skills and expertise and become functionally interdependent in order to produce knowledge they could not have generated on their own' (Kosmutzky, 2018, p. 316).

This definition, which emphasises the relevance of the social dimension of research collaborations as well as the need for knowledge integration and research management skills, effectively highlights the challenges and different levels of complexity of research collaborations, which are all the more evident in international collaboration.

Researchers around the world are increasingly taking up these challenges, making the issue of the management of international research networks highly topical.

Increasing relevance and impact

In 2013, Jonathan Adams, in an influential communication on Nature, spoke of a 'fourth age of research' (Adams, 2013, p. 557), following the individual, institutional and national ages. The fourth research age is driven by international research collaboration between individuals and research groups. Analysing

twenty-five million papers from Thomson Reuters Web of Science between 1981 and 2012, he found that while the number of publications authored by scientists from a single country has stagnated, the entire increase in publications was due to international collaborations, with a stronger effect in Western countries. The analysis also showed a greater impact of internationally co-authored publications than national ones in terms of citations. In general, as reported by Kosmutzky and Wöhlert (2021), the continuously increasing rate of co-authored publications in recent decades has led scholars to speak of a 'collaborative turn' (Olechnicka et al., 2019, p. 176) and a 'research collaboration revolution' (Bozeman & Youtie, 2020, p. 3), motivated by increasing disciplinary specialisation and increasingly complex research problems, that require many scientists to join forces. In addition to being facilitated by information and communication technologies, this trend is encouraged and in part determined by the requirements of national and international funding agencies, which increasingly demand research partners to come together in larger research consortia. This is the case with the European Commission's Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation, where partners from at least three European countries are generally required for a proposal to be eligible for funding (Lebeau & Papatsiba, 2016; Kosmutzky, 2018).

However, disciplinary differences are significant (Kyvik & Reimert, 2017). Studies on international collaboration focus mainly on the natural sciences, life sciences, and engineering, and less on the social sciences. This reflects the more limited internationalisation of social sciences and humanities (Dusdal & Powell, 2021), which remain relatively unexplored (Reichmann, 2013; Wohlert, 2020). According to Kosmutzky (2018, p. 315), the natural sciences are expected to produce universal knowledge, so they are accustomed to 'a mode of large-team big science knowledge production, and show a high level of international collaboration'. The knowledge produced by the social sciences and humanities, on the other hand, is 'more culturally bound, showing a lower rate of international collaboration' (ibidem). Nevertheless, international co-publications in the social sciences have increased significantly in recent years (Helmich et al., 2018), and international collaborative research has also become an increasingly relevant form of research in the social sciences (Kosmutzky & Wöhlert, 2021).

Increased international cooperation, indeed, brings several, often novel, benefits to social research. As remarked by Kosmutzky (2018), besides additional access to funding, increased impact, and an expansion of personal and institutional networks, there are additional instrumental and epistemic rationales for international research collaboration, particularly in comparative social research, making it possible to access knowledge about the context and culture of the countries under investigation as well as contacts and data on the local ground. Indeed, in

the social sciences, international collaboration is particularly common and beneficial in comparative research, where data needs to be collected from different countries. In this case, different national, geographical, social and cultural contexts make it difficult for foreign researchers to fully grasp the significance of the phenomena observed and the data collected. Still according to Kosmutzky (2018, p. 5), 'while a so-called "safari approach" of single-nation research teams that ventured into foreign countries to collect data and gather material for comparative analyses was predominant up to the 1980s, from the mid-1990s onwards, multi-national research teams and international research networks have become a more and more common mode of comparative research'.

In terms of benefits, Baumgartner and colleagues (2023) also highlight the ability of networks to enable the study of complex research questions, the diversity (e.g., epistemic, geographical, cultural) of the perspectives that are captured in research, and the sharing of expertise and best practice (Forscher et al., 2022; Turner & Baker, 2020).

Patterns and hierarchies of collaboration

To reap the benefits of international collaboration, types of research design are important, as different research designs influence patterns of collaboration, which are reflected in the architecture of researchers' networks. A first important distinction is between networks that exist independently of a specific research project and networks that are established to carry out one. Networks in the former group represent a relevant part of international collaborative research efforts. They can be defined as 'largely voluntary, substantially autonomous, self-governed social entities or systems based on mutual interest of multiple individuals' (Kosmutzky, 2018), also characterised by being pretty fluid, with unstable memberships and ill-defined boundaries (Weiss & Hoegl, 2015). Networks in the latter group (created ad hoc for a specific research project) may originate from more informal networks but take on a more formalised structure linked to the needs of project implementation.

It is the latter group that is relevant to the purpose of this chapter, since the network of national researchers was set up to carry out the research tasks of the RESISTIRÉ project, and its structure and operating mechanisms were designed based on the project's objectives, tasks, and timetable. In any case, this group is far from homogeneous. A major axis of difference, and one which is particularly salient in the case of RESISTIRÉ, concerns the more or less hierarchical structure of the network. Esser and Hanitzsch (2012), building on the work of Hasebrink and Herzog (2002) identify a typology of collaboration networks in the social sciences – and particularly in comparative social science research – ordered based on the level of centralisation

and hierarchy (Table 7.1). Four models are described, (1) the centralised model, (2) the correspondents model, (3) the coordinated cooperation model and, (4) the coordinated, fully comparative cooperation model.

Table 7.1: Summary of the four models of international research

	Centralised model	**Correspondents model**	**Coordinated cooperation model**	**Coordinated, fully comparative cooperation model**
Leading entity	International institution	Any university/research institution	Network/consortium with a coordinator	*As in the previous model*
Funding	Long or short-term internal funding	Short-term funding (research grant)	Short-term funding (research grant)	*As in the previous model*
Researchers	In-house researchers	Contracted researchers	Researchers or institutions from different countries	*As in the previous model*
Research design	Theory/methodology designed centrally	Theory/methodology designed centrally	All researchers contribute on an equal basis	*As in the previous model*
Coordination and control	Ordinary internal coordination/control mechanisms	Centrally devised guidelines and coordination/control mechanisms	Agreed upon guidelines and coordination/control mechanisms	*As in the previous model*
Responsibility for data analysis	Data are returned for central analysis	Data are returned for central analysis	Each researcher performs the analysis of the data they have collected, and one (or a few) analyse the entire dataset	All researchers perform the analysis of the data they have collected and of the entire dataset

Source: Derived from Esser and Hanitzsch, 2012

The four models can also be reduced to two by considering the first two as variants of a centralised model and the second two as variants of a collaborative model. In terms of their effectiveness in achieving the goal of international research, more or less centralised and collaborative models present different sets of advantages and disadvantages.

According to Esser and Hanitzsch, centralised models can be effective in providing harmonised sets of data for comparison, but the centralisation of research design and tools carries the risk that they will not fit all different contexts, will not be uniformly understood by all national researchers, and will ultimately risk 'research imperialism' (2012, p. 525). Furthermore, 'special care needs to be taken in the centralised model about the cross-cultural suitability of concepts used and normative standards employed to prevent misleading or even invalid conclusions from being drawn' (ibidem).

On the other hand, according to Esser and Hanitzsch, highly collaborative models imply that all participants have to agree on the theories, concepts, methods and tools to be used, and this is not always an easy thing to do, while 'too much theoretical diversity can seriously threaten a collaborative project' (2012, p. 528). In some cases, one theoretical approach will prevail at the expense of others, while in other cases, many approaches, some even divergent, will coexist and will only be addressed in the analytical phase, when issues may arise that are difficult to resolve (Swanson, 1992).

Critical issues in collaborative research

As Kosmutzky (2018) notes, 'international collaboration in comparative research projects is both a source of better solutions and of amplified complications' (National Research Council, 2015, p. 4), and indeed it is generally acknowledged that it can slow down the research process, while the risk of failure is very real, even if the reasons for failure are an under-researched area (National Research Council, 2015).

Many key issues have been identified in the management of international research networks, some of which are specific to a particular collaboration model. Those of interest here are mostly related to what the SciTS refers to as the broad area of *teamwork*, as opposed to *task work* (Turner & Baker, 2020). While teamwork refers to the interactions within the team and the level of knowledge exchange that is needed to pursue the objective of collaboration, taskwork refers to the implementation of the activities that are needed to execute the project and is strongly discipline-specific.

According to Turner and Baker (2020), teamwork activities require each team member to work both independently and interdependently. The factors that can facilitate or hinder this relate to both *structural* and *dynamic* features of the collaboration network. Structural features include, e.g., the institutional context, the group composition or policy-related or cultural factors, while dynamic features include, e.g., the coaching of network members, team cognition[1], conflict management, cooperation, and coordination processes (Dihn & Salas, 2017).

Structural features that impact teamwork may refer to the internal agreements or contractual arrangements shaping the collaboration (Turner & Baker, 2020) and affecting the distribution of tasks and the allocation of resources (Dusdal & Powell, 2021), as well as the exploitation of results in terms of patents and publications (Welsh et al., 2008; Bekkers et al., 2002; Kosmutzky, 2018; Wine, 2020).

Also, very practical issues can affect collaborative work, related to different time zones, limited travel resources and the failure to appreciate linguistic nuances (National Research Council, 2015).

Other elements can also be broadly categorised as structural. Work style fit can be an issue when there is a clash between authoritarian and more participative work styles and cultures (Bozeman et al., 2015). This is often related to differences in status relationships and power between team members (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Challenges can also derive from differences between the work pace of team members (Bozeman et al., 2015, p. 3), while cultural and organisational differences in communication patterns or levels of information sharing often hinder fruitful collaboration limiting team cognition (Dusdal & Powell, 2021).

Differences in career stage are relevant. People at different career stages bring different perspectives and skills (Cheruvelil et al., 2014), but there is a risk that younger researchers are under-recognised, while they are the ones working on the project on a day-to-day basis. Different levels of seniority are linked to different types of motivations to engage in a collaborative research network, which may include, besides the interest in the research topic, the reinforcement of personal relationships, career advancement, learning new theoretical approaches and methods, networking, and interest in multidisciplinary work (Dusdal & Powell, 2021). However, if not aligned, different motivations can lead to poor

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1   According to Salas et al. (2007), 'team cognition' refers to team members holding a shared understanding of the task, the tools available to them, and their teammates. Team cognition has been identified as key to achieving mission objectives in dynamic, team-based, distributed and multicultural operations.

collaborative outcomes (Bozeman et al., 2015). Gender issues are always inter-twined with power and seniority differentials, with women over-represented among researchers at earlier career stages.

While team diversity is generally considered to be beneficial, especially in in-ternational research (Cheruvelil et al., 2014; McAlpine et al., 2020), some argue that the potential positive effects of diversity on group performance may only last up to a certain level (van Knippenberg et al., 2004), as the lack of a common theoretical or methodological frame of reference may hinder the understanding and appreciation of the contributions of other team members.

Summing up, structural challenges are connected with geographical disper-sion and cultural differences (time zones and travel issues), linguistic differences, differences in academic styles and frames of references, power differences, and institutional differences (infrastructure, research ethics and workloads) (Kos-mutzky, 2018; Wagner, 2005; Jeong et al., 2014).

Dynamic features concern instead the micro-level of team research, which is at the core of the new transdisciplinary field of the Science of Team Science. It ex-plicitly focuses on the study of research teams, their integrative interactions, the processes, and dynamics of team research, and how they influence the quality and outcomes of research (Kosmutzky, 2018). However, the focus is mostly on the natural sciences or transdisciplinary science and health projects, while 'teams in the social sciences are not on the radar of research in this field' (ibidem: 10).

According to Kosmutzky (2018), the dynamic challenges that need to be con-sidered for effective management of international collaborations revolve around questions such as 'Who is in charge? Who will do the work? How will work be shared and knowledge integrated? Who will take credit for the outcomes of the collaboration?' (ibidem: 7). In international research collaborations, it is there-fore crucial to identify decision-making mechanisms (Baumgartner et al., 2023), as well as conflict resolution procedures, trust-building practices and commu-nication channels between members (Bozeman et al., 2015), and to constantly monitor these processes. However, planning, managing, and monitoring in-ternational collaborations takes time, and a common mistake is to underesti-mate the level of commitment and personal relationships required in such an endeavour and to neglect to formally assign responsibility for coordinating these aspects. In this perspective, formal collaboration agreements and protocols are often recommended (Turner & Baker, 2020; Baumgartner et al., 2023).

Furthermore, as reported by Kosmutzky (2018), some studies have shown that the challenges of managing collaborative research processes differ at dif-ferent phases of the research cycle (Tartas & Muller Mirza, 2007). 'They call for different forms of reflexivity for different phases, e.g., forms that allow mutual

trust building at the beginning of the research process (face-to-face meeting) and forms that allow for constructive critique (in written form) at its end' (Kosmutzky, 2018, p. 21).

Still on the dynamic side of managing international research collaboration, the management of communication can be a relevant challenge, requiring clear communication styles to create understanding, trust and sensitivity; advanced social planning; and functioning technological support (Livingston, 2003). In particular, spatially dispersed collaborations require considerable coordination efforts (Cummings & Kiesler, 2005, p. 704).

Flexibility is another key aspect for the effective management of international research collaboration. It involves continuous negotiation of allocated tasks and their timeframes, as well as open communication and ongoing support from team coordinators, including frequent bilateral exchanges (Dusdal & Powell, 2021).

A related challenge of managing international research collaborations is that they are time-consuming, requiring administration, coordination and continuous exchanges between individuals and teams (Beaver, 2013), as well as interpersonal arrangements in the context of often insufficient timeframes, such as the typical two-three-year project (Dusdal & Powell, 2021).

In addition, many suggest that high-performing collaborative research teams require members with good interpersonal skills, such as social sensitivity and emotional engagement (Cheruvelil et al., 2014). This would call for coordinators and team leaders who are able to manage these aspects and foster an environment that is collegial and non-threatening. Unfortunately, training in effective collaboration is rare in professional programmes, graduate or otherwise (Eigenbrode et al., 2007).

Bozeman and colleagues (2015) highlight the potential for conflict arising from different individual and organisational attitudes and expectations regarding the leadership of the research process, which also include the power to decide about theoretical and methodological approaches (Dusdal & Powell, 2021). This aspect takes on different characteristics depending on the specific collaboration model adopted. According to Esser and Hanitzsch (2012), the more centralised models (Table 7.1) require delivering detailed instructions to geographically dispersed researchers and tightly monitoring their progress. While this is more easily acceptable when the leading entity of the research is a single institution using its staff, in the correspondents model – where a consortium is in charge – researchers may prefer 'a more democratic management that also allows for more room for personal research interests' (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012, p. 525). The correspondents model works better when the participating researchers are

prepared to 'take orders' (ibid.) from the project leadership and accept to have limited academic freedom. For this reason, as Esser and Hanitzsch report, the model tends to be applied in softer and less hierarchical forms. Nevertheless, its centralised and hierarchical workflow can easily lead to dissatisfaction.

In addition, if more collaborative models (Table 7.1) run the risk of protracted discussions and negotiations over theoretical and methodological frameworks, more centralised models – where discussions are centralised and do not involve the contract researchers – run the risk of compromising the researchers' full and consistent understanding or acceptance of such frameworks, also affecting what was referred to above as the task work and its results.

The RESISTIRÉ network of national researchers

Within the complex workflow of RESISTIRÉ, the collection of comprehensive and up-to-date data was a major strength and key to the project's success. To achieve this, the project relied on a large international team of national social science researchers, which was essential to capture and compare the complex impact of the COVID-19 crisis on gender+ inequalities in thirty different countries.

The network established within RESISTIRÉ was involved in three different tasks, to be repeated three times in as many research cycles, which included the collection and first-level analysis of policies and civil society initiatives aimed at mitigating the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups (see Chapter 8), Rapid Assessment Surveys (RAS) conducted during the pandemics (see Chapter 6), and narrative interviews on the COVID-19 experiences of representatives of vulnerable groups (see Chapter 5). Working with national experts (individuals or small teams) allowed for the accurate collection of quantitative and qualitative data, overcoming language barriers in desk research and collecting multiple stories from local informants. By comparing findings across such a wide geographical area, it was possible to identify general trends in worsening inequalities across the EU and gaps in existing policies, as well as a number of promising practices at the national level to mitigate specific vulnerabilities during the crisis.

This process took place over a period of three years, on an intermittent basis, in three cycles of three months each. Coordination mechanisms and strategies had to be put in place to manage and support such a wide network of experts, with all their similarities and differences.

This section aims to briefly describe how the network of NRs was set up and consolidated at the start of the project, the standardised data collection tools that were developed and the principles that guided the coordination processes used to manage the research work. The results of an internal survey aimed at

gathering feedback from participating researchers on the functioning of the network are also presented.

Network genesis, composition and diversity

In terms of architecture, the network built within RESISTIRÉ can be considered a hybrid collaboration model, consisting of a smaller group of researchers from within the consortium (UK, Türkiye, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Belgium, Luxembourg, Czech Republic, Ireland) and a larger group of researchers from outside the consortium. The former are members of the organisations implementing the project. The latter have been specifically and exclusively contracted to carry out fieldwork at national level in three different cycles. As will be discussed below (Section 4), working with a hybrid network offered a specific blend of challenges and benefits in developing a shared understanding of the task and the tools available ('team cognition', Salas et al., 2007).

The initial core of national researchers was identified within the nine partners, where a group of colleagues proposed themselves as reference field workers for the nine countries covered by the consortium. In order to set up the rest of the network, it was necessary to make contact with external social science experts at national level. This was done through a collaborative process in which each of the RESISTIRÉ partners provided the names of relevant experts in their networks, often involved in previous transnational collaborations. These experts were then contacted to assess their willingness to participate in the project. They were given information about the project and the role they would be playing, leaving them enough time to clarify any doubts before making a decision. This phase took several weeks and was completed with a full list of contracted experts from all thirty countries involved.

The selection of NRs followed two main lines. The first was to ensure a high level of expertise in the field and the second was to ensure a certain level of diversity. While the group was homogeneous in terms of gender, with the vast majority of researchers being women, the main dimensions of diversity that underpinned the establishment of the international research team of RESISTIRÉ were: (1) being internal or external to the consortium, (2) being academic or non-academic, (3) specific disciplinary background within the social sciences, (4) mix of expertise in different research topics, (4) different career levels, (5) choosing to work individually or relying on a small national team consisting of contracted NRs who teamed up with colleagues, often younger academics.

The limited gender diversity of the network is notable and needs to be recognised as problematic. Although this reflects the strong preponderance of

women in gender-related research fields, the tight timeframe and the fast pace of the project made it difficult to implement adequate efforts to rebalance the pool. It can be observed that men were more represented among the NRs from the internal research teams of the consortium than as external researchers (men were present in six internal research teams and only one external team).

The hybrid architecture of the network, with its combination of 'internal' and 'external' researchers/teams (nine and twenty-one, respectively), contributed greatly to ensuring the smooth collection of data during the fieldwork. Internal researchers were involved in two key activities, namely developing the research guidelines and tools (mapping grids, interview grids and reporting templates) as well as piloting them. This made it possible to identify, anticipate and resolve potential problems in the design materials at a time prior to the start of the cycle. Internal researchers also played an important role in preparing pre-filled documents to share with the rest of the network at the beginning of each cycle, as further guidance.

The network provided a space for collaboration between academic and non-academic researchers/teams (twenty-four and six respectively), the latter including freelance researchers and consultants, activists and content producers. The coexistence of academic and non-academic NRs allowed for an exploration of the complexity of gender inequalities and their impact on the pandemic from different areas of experience and knowledge. Each member brought years of study and work on the project's themes, along with a high level of emotional commitment and dedication.

Another strength of the network was the presence of experts who looked at issues of inequality from different angles. In terms of disciplinary background[2] within the social sciences, the majority of researchers in the network were sociologists (twelve). These were followed by cultural and social anthropologists (four), political scientists, economists and legal scholars (three each), and communication scholars (two). Finally, a social psychologist, a linguist and a physicist (with expertise in gender equality in academia) were also present.

In addition to their disciplinary backgrounds, researchers in the network had different thematic specialisations. These were very much related to the study of gender and inequalities, and overlapped for a large number of researchers. They included intersectionality (ten researchers), gender equality in research (ten), policy design and evaluation (nine), gender-based violence (nine), gender and

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2   In the case of the small national teams, the disciplinary background of the team leader is reported here.

work (seven), gender in the media (six), gender care gap (five), education (four), Roma people (four), migration (three), environment (three), diversity in organisations (two) and disability (one).

The involvement of researchers at various stages of their careers added value to the research process and results. This was especially true in cases where contracted national experts were able to form small teams, which occurred in eleven out of thirty countries, typically within an academic context. In many cases, the national team consisted of a senior researcher, who also acted as supervisor, and one or more junior researchers. This approach made it possible for different levels of experience, as well as different perspectives, sensitivities and skills to interact and add value to the research.

Standardised data collection tools

As discussed above (Section 2), spatially distributed networks face multiple and significant methodological and socio-cultural complexities that distinguish them from situations where research is conducted at the level of individual institutions or with less extensive transnational research teams. RESISTIRÉ's ambitious goal of collecting a large amount of data in thirty different countries at a very fast pace, using a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods, required not only the development of standardised data collection tools, but also the creation of a coordination structure and timely communication and monitoring mechanisms. This would have allowed each researcher or small team in the network to carry out fieldwork independently at national level, while responding to a system of formalised routines and content-specific task and workflow timeframes.

To ensure the success of the data collection, it was necessary to establish a clear methodology linked to a set of standardised data collection tools for each of the three planned fieldwork tasks. To this end, prior to each research cycle, three guidance documents were developed by the consortium to guide the NRs as well as three sets of tools, including mapping grids, interview grids and reporting templates for each task under each cycle. In addition, a clear list of quantitative outputs required from NRs at national level was communicated and quality standards were illustrated through examples of pre-filled mapping grids and reporting templates. Finally, the NRs were given access to a personal folder on a shared online platform, where they could find templates and pre-filled grids, and recordings of the briefings. They could also store documents, working materials, drafts and reports.

The creation of these tools was a moment of intense work and exchange within the consortium, led by the leaders of qualitative and quantitative research

strands and policy analysis (details can be found in the dedicated chapters of the book), with the support of all consortium members. In particular, internal NRs were heavily involved in the development of fieldwork instructions and standardised data collection tools, and in piloting them before the official start of each cycle. The pilot test enabled any problems, ambiguities or inconsistencies to be identified. In order to be as suitable as possible to the many different national contexts, the guidelines and tools had to be consistent and clear. At the same time, all NRs in the network had to be given a degree of independence to flexibly interpret and adapt the tools to make them efficient in accessing data and knowledge in their national contexts. This was discussed with the NRs in dedicated meetings, as described in the next section.

Coordination mechanisms

This section provides an overview of the main coordination activities established and developed in each research cycle, led by a network coordinator identified from within the project consortium. The purpose is to present the communication, support, and monitoring mechanisms used and to demonstrate how they evolved throughout the project with a degree of flexibility. This flexibility allowed for the incorporation of lessons learned and feedback from working with NRs in each cycle. This was achieved by gradually increasing horizontal exchange within the network, moving from bilateral to multilateral exchange.

Prior to the start of the research process, at the beginning of the first cycle, the geographical spread of the network and its diversity recommended that considerable effort be invested in establishing effective working relationships, mutual understanding and trust, sensitivity and commitment. This required a constant exchange of emails between the network coordinator and the researchers in each country, as well as bilateral online meetings.

Cycle One, which ran from May 2021 to July 2021, started with a collective online briefing. This was an opportunity for the national researchers, the leaders of the different research strands, the project coordinator and the network coordinator to introduce themselves and learn about each other's knowledge, skills, experience and areas of expertise. The project was presented and discussed in detail and the researchers were informed of their role and tasks. The guidelines and tools to be used were presented and navigated thoroughly. The helpdesk for NRs was launched during the online briefing, with the aim of providing personalised and timely support through email exchanges or otherwise. After the briefing, both internal and external NRs were required to book at least one bilateral online support and monitoring meeting with the network coordinator in order to

review the work carried out and clarify any doubts or questions about the tasks assigned, as well as to check that the deadlines set were being met or agree on alternative ones.

A feedback meeting was organised by the network coordinator between the first and second cycles. The meeting aimed to collect the views of external researchers on their experience with the fieldwork, in terms of the theoretical and methodological approaches and the different research tools. The research leaders of the project were also in attendance. The meeting provided useful insights for designing research activities and network processes in the second cycle. It supported horizontal exchanges and helped break down hierarchical relations between internal and external researchers.

The implementation of *Cycle Two*, which took place from December 2021 to February 2022, also began with an online briefing, where the research leaders and the network coordinator could present the research design for the new cycle for the different research areas, along with the new guidelines and tools.

The helpdesk for NRs was re-established to provide personalised and timely support through email exchanges and bilateral meetings, which were available on request. In addition, small group meetings were scheduled as the main support and monitoring tool in the second cycle. As in the first cycle, the purpose of these meetings was to address new doubts and questions raised by the researchers and monitor the progress of research at the national level. This time, however, encouraging exchanges between internal and external researchers was at the heart of the support strategy. This created added value for network members and the project itself, as experiences and knowledge were incorporated into the theoretical background preparation for the following cycle.

In *Cycle Three*, which occurred between September and December 2022, the theoretical and methodological framework underwent further development and became more complex, particularly in relation to the qualitative research design. This was due to the introduction of two new elements that formed the basis for national-level fieldwork: the search for 'better stories' (Georgis, 2013) and Lister's theory of agency (Lister, 2004) (see Chapter 5). After a third briefing meeting, updated guidelines and tools were introduced, and helpdesk support was strengthened. General meetings with NRs were scheduled on a weekly basis, in addition to email support and bilateral meetings upon request. Weekly general meetings were held to help NRs become more familiar with the extended theoretical background that underpinned the research scope in the last cycle. All researchers were welcome to attend on a voluntary basis. The purpose of the meetings remained consistent with the previous two cycles, which was to clarify any doubts or questions the researchers had and to monitor their progress.

However, as in the second cycle, group meetings facilitated the exchange and deepening of research experiences, as well as access to resources, insights and knowledge generated at the national level. Some researchers also established positive synergies for bilateral cooperation beyond RESISTIRÉ.

At the end of each cycle, the submission phase was accompanied by an additional formal and qualitative control activity by the network coordinator. This activity sometimes involved going back to the team members to ask for additions or clarifications. All this was done in order to harmonise and unify the data collected at national level. These data could then be analysed and compared in the subsequent research phases.

Ex-post evaluation of network experience by NRs

In order to evaluate the satisfaction of the NRs with the hybrid network model just described, a qualitative feedback questionnaire was set up and distributed three months after the end of the RESISTIRÉ project, so that NRs within the network, both internal and external, could share their experience.

The questionnaire was sent to all NRs who had been involved in at least one cycle of the research work, whether they were external team leaders (21) or internal team members (13). The overall response rate has been 41%, significantly higher for external researchers, with twelve forms that have been returned (57%) than for internal ones, with only two returned forms (15%). The significant difference between the external and internal response rates may be attributed to the fact that internal researchers had several opportunities to discuss the network's experience during consortium meetings and project events, whereas external researchers had fewer occasions to provide their feedback.

As full anonymity was guaranteed, it is impossible to determine the number of countries represented by the responses received.

The responses provided are useful to shed light on RESISTIRÉ's network's main challenges and strengths regarding, (1) the data collection tools and their presentation and discussion at the beginning of each research cycle, (2) the support provided to the NRs in carrying out their tasks during each research cycle, (3) the horizontal exchange and mutual learning mechanisms with other NRs, and, (4) the feeling that their own skills, knowledge and perspectives were valued and reflected in the research work of the three cycles.

From the feedback gathered on the *guidelines and data collection tools*, it emerges that researchers generally found the guidelines useful, and appreciated receiving them in advance, before the start of the cycles. The briefing at the beginning of each cycle to present the tools, with the participation of many

representatives of the research consortium, seems to have been one of the strengths of the process, as it provided clear guidance and at the same time brought the contracted researchers into contact with the research leaders.

Briefing sessions were also useful for reporting feedback, as one researcher remarks: 'The second and third [briefing] meetings were very helpful, where past research experiences of NRs were represented, which were useful for our work in the next cycle(s)'. [NR08]

In general, both preparatory work and discussions at the end of the research cycles were appreciated. A researcher highlights the importance of feedback meetings to incorporate NR's perspectives: 'I particularly liked the evaluation process after each research cycle, where we had the opportunity to give feedback on the guidelines and grids'. [NR04]

Most of the researchers who answered the feedback questionnaire reported that the grids and other tools were efficient and straightforward. However, one external researcher raised the issue of the suitability of harmonised tools for very different national contexts, which is a typical problem of centralised collaboration models.

> The guidelines and tools were too rigid and specific. I often felt that I could not apply the guidelines and grids to the national context I was working on. Also, a lot of important details were lost when trying to fit information into the grid. [NR01]

Regarding the evaluation of the *support provided by the helpdesk* during each cycle, the NRs mostly found it useful, as summarised by one researcher: 'I was supported every step of the way'. [NR06]

The large and small group meetings were also appreciated. They allowed external researchers to feel confident and implement the instructions without getting stuck. As one researcher comments, 'The group meetings were very good, and I was impressed how many national researchers were very active and motivated – the spirit was very good'. [NR09]

One external researcher was instead very critical, which highlights the difficult balance that needs to be struck between trying to fully involve and support contract researchers in particular, and not placing additional burdens on them.

> The meetings were very helpful but took too long considering the time we were paid for. For such long and frequent meetings, the payment was extremely low. If I had known, I would not have agreed to do it, because it clashed with several commitments I had. [NR01]

According to the feedback gathered, *horizontal exchange* could have been used more. Indeed, although some NRs found the connection with the network

inspiring, some reported limited horizontal communication and attributed it to a lack of time or encouragement from the project. There seems to be an unfulfilled desire to establish stronger relations with the rest of the network. A quote can be used to exemplify this attitude: 'I appreciated it too late in the process. Maybe it could have been more compulsory'. [NR10]
Some formulate suggestions to strengthen this aspect.

> I would have liked to deepen more that connection. But that was not the aim of this project. What I mean is that to exchange experience with other national experts would be great, if for example a community of practice or something of that kind existed. [NR12]

At the other extreme, one researcher reported the feeling that NRs were just taking orders, as in the classic 'correspondents model' (see Section 2).

> I think this aspect could have been improved if there had been more discussion on how to design the networks and guidelines. The discussions were more technical and focused on the problems individual NRs had in applying this grid. As we were not involved in the design, we felt that we were just carrying out orders and practical tasks rather than contributing to the project in a meaningful way. [NR1]

Feedback was positive about the extent to which *individual skills and abilities* were recognised within the project, both during the fieldwork and in subsequent publications. Most of the researchers who answered the questionnaire stated that they felt valued, as reported by this researcher: 'I felt involved and recognised in the network. Overall, working with the network was a positive experience'. [NR5]

However, some reported that although they felt involved overall, their work had to be done individually, so they didn't feel fully part of a research team. The meetings helped to mitigate this perception to some extent by giving the group a sense of working together.

> I felt involved in the network, although my research work was done 'solo'; I was not a part of any research team, so in this regard the briefing meetings and meetings during cycles were very positive. We were able to discuss any possible dilemmas, considerations, suggestions in the reporting files and I find this very positive; our opinion was considered. [NR8]

Strongly negative feelings are expressed in this respect by one researcher, who highlights the distance between the research group within the consortium and the NRs. This suggests that meetings and other strategies aimed at supporting participation were for some insufficient in reducing this distance: 'I did not feel that my skills, knowledge and perspectives were of any interest to the main research group'. [NR1]

Before submitting the feedback questionnaire, NRs were asked to share their final thoughts on their experience in the RESISTIRÉ network. Most researchers expressed their satisfaction with the coordination mechanism and the support received, stating that they had benefited from being part of the network. Some quotes can be reported along this line: 'Excellent experience for such an important project for the society' [NR3]; 'Overall, working with the network was an interesting experience – I learned a lot during this time' [NR5]; 'Overall participation in the network was a positive experience, also because the preparation and the support given to NRs was very well executed'. [NR8]

Three researchers conclude instead their contribution by expressing disappointment with the network structure, stressing the need for more horizontal setups and stronger involvement.

> From my perspective, the work that the NRs were asked to do didn't reflect a network structure, in which everyone participates and shares. It was mostly a top-down, very technical, bureaucratic, and strict procedure that didn't really take into consideration the perspectives of NRs. [NR1]
> I think the experience was valuable, but more links with individual (external) NRs could be an idea for the future, for example to allow NRs to work together on publications, etc. [NR2]
> I would have liked to be more involved in the analysis, after the data collection stage. [NR14]

The next section discusses the tested network architecture in RESISTIRÉ, also based on the feedback received. It reviews some of the coordination challenges and the solutions that were found during the research process, highlighting areas for needed improvements.

Discussion and conclusions

At the end of its work, the network established within RESISTIRÉ had collected and analysed 329 public policies, twenty-six National Recovery and Resilience Plans, 326 civil society initiatives, 316 Rapid Assessment Surveys (RAS), and 794 individual narratives in the thirty countries covered.

This is a notable achievement, especially considering the limited timeframe of ten months in total, over the three cycles. The intensive effort that was needed to achieve these results required that a structured network with dedicated resources and coordination be set up to harmonise and support the work of the NRs and monitor its progress.

This inevitably led to a degree of centralisation, establishing a certain hierarchy between the various groups involved. Some of these groups were connected

but external to the network and referred to the general consortium leading the project, comprising the scientific coordination and the leaders of the different research strands. They provided the theoretical and methodological background of the research work and the connected tools. But differences also existed within the network. Internal researchers conducting fieldwork at a national level on behalf of organisations participating in the consortium had more opportunities to discuss the research approach and tools and benefited from more contextual information than contracted researchers. This was the case even though they conducted the same tasks, in the same time frame, following the same guidelines, and receiving the same support. One of the roles of the central team set up to coordinate the network was specifically to link and facilitate communication between these different groups.

The hybrid nature of the RESISTIRÉ network, between 'correspondents' and 'collaborative' models (see Section 2), lies precisely in the fact that it was a structured and somewhat hierarchical network that nevertheless aimed to establish horizontal links and involve all researchers in feedback loops that would provide suggestions and insights to be taken up by the research consortium. In addition, the network had a hybrid architecture because it included both researchers who participated in the research consortium and external, contract researchers.

The rationale for this architecture was largely practical. The consortium needed to expand its geographical reach, but limited funding prevented the establishment of a larger group of research organisations. To avoid creating a group of contract researchers with too limited an insight into the project's objectives and approach, a unified network was created, bringing together researchers from both inside and outside the consortium. This structure was chosen because it had the potential to spread team cognition (Salas et al., 2007) through horizontal exchanges, leading to better harmonisation and higher-quality research outputs.

This hybrid model efficiently produced the expected results and supported harmonisation. However, as is reflected in the feedback received, both strengths and weaknesses can be highlighted. These can be reviewed by roughly dividing them into structural and dynamic issues in research collaborations (see Section 2) (Dihn & Salas, 2017; Turner et al., 2018).

In terms of *structural challenges*, the nature of the funding (Turner & Baker, 2020) played a relevant role, as noted above, in shaping the structure of the network and the allocation of roles, also dictating the use of contract researchers. The characteristics of the research design, which emphasised the rapid production and exploitation of research results in three intensive cycles, were also critical in determining the network's fast-paced working patterns and the need for a degree of centralisation.

Within this framework, power differentials emerged between network members (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), although not so much in terms of gender, as the vast majority of network members were women. The more striking power differential that emerged was related to being internal or external to the consortium, an aspect that was acutely felt by some of the researchers who provided their feedback. In these cases, the 'network' frame was felt to be contradictory to centralisation and hierarchy and raised a legitimate expectation that decisions about research design and tools would be more widely shared. The hybrid nature of the network has therefore been a source of confusion and frustration for some of the participating researchers.

On the positive side of the RESISTIRÉ network structure, the existence of a dedicated coordination team to centralise operations and provide ongoing support was well received. Given the complexity of the project, the network coordination role was explicitly foreseen and adequately resourced, and the effort required was not underestimated, as is often the case (Ledford, 2015). It helped to overcome typical structural barriers in geographically dispersed collaborations, such as those related to language differences and differences in working styles and cultures (National Research Council, 2015; Bozeman et al., 2015). It provided a very flexible, highly accessible helpdesk where researchers could monitor and negotiate their schedules and commitments and receive support in connecting with the wider network and consortium. The helpdesk thus acted as a sort of mediating structure between the national researchers and the consortium.

Another structural element of the network, its diversity, had a beneficial effect in supporting nuanced interpretations of research strategies and findings, and the elaboration of multiple fieldwork strategies (Cheruvelil et al., 2014; McAlpine et al., 2020). The potential shortcomings of excessive team diversity, related to the lack of a common theoretical or methodological frame of reference (van Knippenberg et al., 2004), were instead mitigated by the leadership provided at the central consortium level.

One of the main structural challenges of the project, namely the limited time available for a very concentrated and intensive engagement over three cycles, created several difficulties for national researchers. One solution that was often adopted, especially by senior researchers, was to form small national teams with one or more junior researchers working on the project on a day-to-day basis. The ability to rely on a small national team rather than a single individual ensured that work could continue in the event of personal absence (e.g., maternity leave), which was particularly important as women were over-represented in this network.

Turning to the *dynamic challenges* in research collaborations, these relate to the micro level of team interactions and processes and how they affect the quality and outcomes of research (Kosmutzky, 2018).

The first set of issues stems again from the hybrid structure of the RESISTIRÉ network, which not only risked provoking a clash of expectations (see above) about who was involved and had decision-making power over the research design (Baumgartner et al., 2023; Kosmutzky, 2018), but also placed a double burden on the coordinating team, which had to manage two related but different strands of activities in a limited timeframe. These were, on the one hand (centralised side), the provision of clear guidance, reference materials and tools, and follow-up activities through individualised, ongoing support and monitoring. On the other hand (horizontal side), there was the need to create opportunities for exchange and group interaction, both within the network and with the research leaders of the consortia, and to create communication channels to keep the two in touch. However, the work was intensive, and the support and monitoring aspect consumed most of the time and energy. As a result, the horizontal exchange aspect was less developed due to the limited time available, which is reflected in the feedback received.

Despite the many challenges, the RESISTIRÉ hybrid network has been able to generate many positive dynamics that have underpinned its ability to carry out several harmonised analyses at a very fast pace. The emotionally supportive and non-threatening working environment created (Turner & Baker, 2020) contributed to this, as the feedback received largely shows.

Although the participatory processes with external researchers were mostly deployed during or at the end of the cycles, in the form of feedback meetings, rather than in the research design phase, the cyclical setup allowed these exchanges to help sharpen the theoretical basis and methodological approach of the fieldwork as the project progressed. The monitoring, support and exchange processes also evolved from cycle to cycle, adapting to the different phases of the network and the research process (Kosmutzky, 2018; Tartas & Muller Mirza, 2007). They gradually moved from more centralised, bilateral exchange and support to more horizontal group meetings, where support was mainly provided through peer exchange.

In conclusion, the RESISTIRÉ hybrid network architecture proved capable of delivering harmonised, high-quality results in a limited timeframe and across multiple research strands. The support provided by the coordination team, although resource-intensive, was instrumental in achieving these objectives. Putting together internal researchers with external, contract researchers benefited

the network and helped spread team cognition and reduce the gaps between network members.

However, also due to time constraints, horizontal exchange and feedback mechanisms were somewhat underdeveloped and, above all, took place when the research design was already advanced, reducing the space for NRs to have a say.

Thus, while the network integrated participatory aspects that qualify it as a hybrid between fully centralised and fully collaborative models (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012), it did not completely escape the risk, highlighted by some (Bozeman et al., 2015; Dusdal & Powell, 2021), that different expectations regarding the governance of the research process, including the power to decide on theoretical and methodological aspects, could lead to frustration and, above all, reduce the benefits of collaboration.

What is the right balance between, on the one hand, the need to collect theoretically and methodologically consistent and comparable data at a rapid pace and, on the other hand, maximizing the potential offered by the collaboration of a diverse network, especially in complex and context-specific areas of research, is a question that may not have a univocal answer. Elements such as the type and level of funding, the specific objectives of the research and its timing are likely to determine the more or less centralised or fully collaborative set-up in different cases. What is clear from the feedback received is the need to invest sufficient time at an early stage in communicating with the researchers involved to clarify the structure of the collaboration and to avoid raising expectations that may not be met.

The hybrid network tested in RESISTIRÉ was an attempt to make the most of both standardisation and participation, harmonisation and diversity, going beyond the simple 'softening' of centralised correspondents models (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012) by creating a network integrating both internal and external researchers. The results are broadly positive but suggest that improvements could be achieved by (1) improving the clarity of communication about roles, (2) establishing clear and more direct communication channels between internal and external researchers and with research leaders, (3) involving external researchers earlier in the process and, especially where this is not possible, (4) considering a cyclical or phased research design with carefully designed feedback mechanisms to systematically incorporate input.

International networks of researchers, such as the one set up in RESISTIRÉ, are becoming increasingly common in the social sciences, in response to global and complex research questions and the demands of funding agencies. The architecture of these networks needs to be carefully planned in advance in order to make the most of the involvement of people from different backgrounds, with

their expertise and insights, while at the same time meeting often strict deadlines in the implementation of complex research designs. The experience described here illustrates the significance of both structural and dynamic aspects of cooperation, offering a chance for much-needed practice-based reflection.

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Assessing the gender+ perspective in the COVID-19 recovery and resilience plans

Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak has led policymakers across the world to an unprecedented effort in policy responses to address the health crisis and its socio-economic impacts. As many parts of Europe witnessed the initial wave of COVID-19 cases and fatalities, the urgency of devising strategies for sustainable, inclusive, and socially responsible recovery became increasingly apparent. The pandemic prompted the implementation of national policies and measures across various domains to curb infections and save lives. Many of the measures taken significantly altered our way of life, especially quarantining, self-isolation and social distancing becoming the new norm. These changes redefined societal structures, leading to increased remote work, home-schooling, and a heightened online presence, each with its unique and sometimes unintended consequences (Bonaccorsi et al., 2020). Furthermore, the pandemic brought about furloughs and job losses, resulting in economic hardship and mental health challenges. Vulnerable groups, in particular, faced heightened risks and inequalities, including increased exposure to domestic violence, reduced personal assistance for people with disabilities, hate speech targeting minorities, and reported surges in xenophobia and racism towards those perceived as Asian. Unjust dismissals of individuals with caregiving responsibilities were also reported (EQUINET, 2021). Moreover, the pandemic posed significant risks to healthcare workers, educators, and other contact professionals, as well as service industries, due to the necessity for physical contact (WHO, 2020). Some EU governments entered bilateral agreements to lift travel restrictions, allowing certain essential workers such as nurses and crop gatherers to compensate for labour shortages. However, this placed workers from economically disadvantaged countries at increased risk, highlighting ongoing economic disparities within the EU and the reliance on migrant labour in wealthier nations, which often strained under-resourced healthcare systems in less affluent countries (Rogozanu & Gabor, 2020). Furthermore, the path to recovery was fraught with uncertainty, as the duration of

the pandemic remained unpredictable, with the possibility of future cycles and peaks, and its unequal impact on diverse segments of the population.

In 2021, in the post-pandemic phase, EU Member States reached a consensus on the establishment of the Next Generation EU (NGEU), a temporary recovery instrument in response to the social and economic crises precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic with a total budget of €806.9 billion, financed through EU borrowing on financial markets (Sapala, 2021; Crescenzi et al., 2021). Central to this initiative was the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility, serving as the primary mechanism for allocating a substantial portion (89,7%) of the NGEU funds to Member States. This allocation was contingent upon the adoption of a National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) by each Member State, provided a positive assessment from the European Commission and approval by the Council.

The Regulation establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility set gender equality as a cross-cutting priority for the recovery plans (EC, 2021b; EU, 2021). From very early on, it was noticed that the crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, similarly to previous crises, was influenced both by gender and by other factors such as sex, ethnicity/race, social class, age, disability, migration status, and religion, as well as the intersections between these inequalities (Lokot & Avakyan, 2020). The impact of the crisis was characterised by unevenness and inequality, with disproportional consequences for various groups, whose long-term effects remained uncertain (Cumming et al., 2020). The inclusion of gender as a cross-cutting issue in the Recovery Plans has created the opportunity to compare how different countries translated gender-related issues into their policy agenda in a crisis context. The analysis of the quality of these policy responses and their impact on pre-existing gender inequalities has been at the core of the RESISTIRÉ's research endeavour.

Drawing from the gender+ approach, RESISTIRÉ understood gender inequalities as always intersecting with and being shaped by other inequalities (Verloo, 2013; Walby et al., 2012). Applying this framework, national researchers working on the project were asked to analyse from a 'gender+ perspective' 'the policy process, the content of the plan, and the reactions from civil society organisations to these measures'. The chapter builds on those analyses and provides a reflection on how the national recovery and resilience plans (NRRPs) address gender+ issues in the different policy domains of the project (gender-based violence; work and labour market; economy; gender pay and pension gaps; gender care gap; decision-making and politics; environmental justice; health and education), what kind of policy solutions are presented as ways to forward gender

equality, and where gender-sensitive measures are still missing among various policy areas.

This chapter first assesses the difficulties that scholars have identified in the incorporation of intersectionality to policymaking. Second, the specific intersectional framework developed by the RESISTIRÉ project, the gender+ perspective, is explained regarding both its theoretical basis and its methodological deployment. The third main section contains the findings of the project resulting from the application of RESISTIRÉ gender+ perspective to the national recovery and resilience plans. The final section looks ahead and identifies the challenges and lessons learned to incorporate intersectionality in policy-making in times of crisis. Despite the fact that Europe has a solid formulation of equality policies, the conclusions reached at the end of this chapter highlight the inconsistency between the political discourse and the practical implementation of equality policies, and even more so of intersectional approaches in the recovery-related policies put in place in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Difficulties in incorporating intersectionality in policymaking: A review

Intersectionality can be broadly defined as the interaction of different axes of power (gender, race, class, etc.) which create differentiated positions of relative privilege or oppression. The inclusion of an intersectional perspective or an intersectional analysis has become a requirement for credible research in various areas of social sciences, especially when researching inequality or equality policies. Notwithstanding this success, the lingering controversies over its meaning, scope, and strength point out the complexity of this notion. The term 'intersectionality' coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, captured a problem that has accompanied the feminist movement almost since its inception: the differences between women resulting from other axes of inequality. For example, already in 1891 or 1892, faced with the refusal of liberal feminists to accept legal protections for working women, Eleanor Marx replied that Mrs. Fawcett (leader of the most conservative of the liberal suffragist organisations, the NUWSS) and a washerwoman had no more in common than Rothschild and one of his employees (Draper & Lipow, 1976, p. 225).

The problem of intersectionality posed by Crenshaw at the end of the 1980s picked up some difficulties that had emerged within the feminist movements in the USA, especially in the elaboration of Black feminist groups. Some authors have shown how understandings of intersectionality varied geographically, especially between the more systemic approach that characterised the US approach,

and a UK or European approach, which attributed a key role to subjectivity (Prins, 2006; Bilge, 2010). In Europe, intersectionality is mostly understood as a form of conceptualising identity and experiences of oppression (Nash, 2008; Morondo, 2016). This conceptualisation resonates with what Crenshaw termed 'political intersectionality' (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252ff), that is, the relevance of inequalities and their interaction in the political strategies of social groups, and the realisation that strategies related to one axis are rarely neutral in relation to other axes of inequality. For example, the persisting gender roles in care work have traditionally intersected with class, and currently also with migrant status, shifting the burden of gendered care duties from European women to migrant women, who often must leave their own families behind. The need to pay attention to this intersection of power hierarchies has become increasingly present in feminist vindications, denouncing the shift of the care duties from wealthier European women to poorer migrant women as a false solution to the gender care gap.

On the other hand, 'structural intersectionality', that is, how the interaction of axes of oppression makes experiences of discrimination or violence different (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245ff) has been accorded little space. Already in 2009, Lombardo and Verloo pointed to the institutionalisation of political intersectionality in the EU, and the intersectional dynamics between civil society and institutions as the two main developing fields in intersectional studies (Lombardo & Verloo, 2009). Another reason for the preference given to 'political intersectionality' is the indeterminacy of the meaning of intersectionality. Whereas conceptual difficulties with the term do not prevent the study of the interaction or alliances between different groups (feminist, migrants, LGBTIQI+, etc.), the ever-changing content of intersectionality – both diversity and inequality, life experiences and discrimination, power relations and circumstances – makes it much more difficult to study its structural or systemic aspects (Barrère & Morondo, 2016).

The success of the notion of intersectionality has been uneven. From a theoretical perspective, the notion started to be criticised on different accounts in the late 2000s. Some authors (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006; Nash, 2008; Conaghan, 2009) did not appreciate the inconsistency and ambiguity that others had considered the reason for its scientific success (Davis, 2008). And – while very few advocated the abandonment of the notion – many suggested a thorough reconsideration. Furthermore, there were serious doubts about its application outside the Academia. Legally, there was no prohibition of intersectional discrimination and various reports commissioned by the European institutions warned of the difficulties in operationalising such a prohibition (Burri & Schiek, 2009). A good part of the work on intersectionality was carried out in the fields of political

sciences and sociology, particularly in the analysis of public policies. Since the mid-2000s, the European Commission started to fund projects which studied the application and scope of intersectionality with a European and comparative vocation, primarily in the context of gender equality policies through methodologies for the assessment of policy formulation (Lombardo & Verloo, 2009; Lombardo & Rolandsen, 2012; Krizsán et al., 2012).

The research pointed out some limitations both regarding the space accorded to intersectionality in European policies, and in relation to the effects of the application of this notion. To begin with, the approach adopted by the European Union was that of 'multiple inequality' (different inequalities were just added one to another) rather than intersectionality. This meant that, in the formulation of policies, the intersection of different axes was not well articulated and its relations with other instruments of equality policies, in particular gender mainstreaming, were ambivalent (Lombardo & Rolandsen, 2012). Research findings pointed to a 'degendering' effect in public policy and a 'watering down' of gender equality policies as a result of the 'multiple equality' approach (Lombardo & Verloo, 2010; Lombardo & Rolandsen, 2012; Barrère, 2010), which in turn created resistances both in the feminist movement as well as in other subordinated groups. Although in Crenshaw's original formulation intersectionality was intended to improve identity politics and antidiscrimination law, its application in the European Union was fuelling competition among discriminated groups, through a differentiated and fragmented patchwork of protection where categories instead of being overcome were reinforced: the question of which categories one belongs to (or is considered to belong to) is increasingly relevant, when only some categories are protected, and the protection that is offered to different categories is unequal (Verloo, 2013, p. 899). The competition fuelled by the multiplication of grounds of discrimination/marginalisation and the fragmentation produced by policy of multiply discriminated groups does not only affect political intersectionality (that is, potential alliances among groups which are now competing for attention or limited resources), but it also makes it difficult to identify and address common structures or dynamics of discrimination and violence, since the identity of the group is established by reinforcing differences with other groups and downplaying differences within the group.

This has led to repeated calls to 'rethink' how intersectionality was done. On the one hand, it is necessary to prevent 'degendering' effects without essentialising the role of sex or gender in policy formulation or policy analysis. On the other hand, it is necessary to try to catch up with structural issues of inequality and disempowerment, which transcend the individual or even collective experiences of those 'multiply burdened'.

The gender+ framework in RESISTIRÉ

Building on existing debates around the application of intersectionality in public policy and the academic literature (Hankivsky et al., 2014), RESISTIRÉ has embraced a specific approach to intersectionality, called 'gender+', which draws on the contributions of Verloo (2013) and Walby and colleagues (2012). The gender+ approach recognises gender as an organising principle and analyses it as always intersecting with other inequalities of race/ethnicity, class, age, disability, and sexuality. This approach is considered as particularly significant in the analysis of the impact on inequalities of policy responses to COVID-19. The research approach adopted is rooted in the principles of Feminist (New) Institutionalism, as articulated by Mackay and colleagues (2010). This perspective views institutions as a pivotal factor in shaping political dynamics and informs our policy-making process. It also addresses the conventional dichotomy between structure and agency by recognising them as mutually constitutive elements within the realm of political analysis, influencing societal change. Within this framework, change is conceptualised as 'bounded agency', as explained by Mackay and colleagues (2010, p. 583), where strategic actors initiate transformations while operating within a framework of opportunities and constraints (Cibin & Linkova, 2023). Furthermore, this approach underscores the gendered nature of relations and institutions. It emphasises that both formal and informal institutions carry gendered aspects that warrant examination through a feminist lens.

With this approach, RESISTIRÉ developed an analysis of 26 NRRPs, including the EU27 minus Malta (hereinafter EU26). Four countries that are not part of the EU27 group and therefore do not participate in the allocation of funds linked to the Recovery and Resilience Facility were also analysed (Iceland, Serbia, Türkiye and the UK). In these cases, policies (and a project, in the case of Türkiye) dealing with post-pandemic recovery and resilience were considered, instead of the NRRPs.

Analytically, RESISTIRÉ drew on an intersectionality-based policy analysis framework (Hankivsky et al., 2014), which had emerged to advance understanding of the differential impacts of health policies in producing inclusive and socially just health outcomes. Empirically, RESISTIRÉ used the policy domains outlined in the European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 (EC, 2020a), namely ending gender-based violence; challenging gender stereotypes; closing gender gaps in the labour market; achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy; addressing the gender pay and pension gaps; closing the gender care gap and achieving gender balance in decision-making and in politics. Additionally, drawing from the Beijing Platform for

Action (1995), the domains of fundamental human rights, and environmental justice were included, because of their relevance on health inequalities. While the previous dimensions fall under the definition of human rights, the project analytically separated the latter, and eventually focused on two specific rights: the right to health and the right to education (Cibin et al., 2022, p. 12).

From a methodological perspective, the analysis implied that, firstly, national researchers (NRs) were tasked with examining the most recent versions of NRRPs or equivalent policies selected for the non-EU group, whether they were in draft or final form, using a gender+ approach. During the analysis period, the majority of these plans had already received approval from the European Commission, except for Hungary, Poland, and Sweden, which were still undergoing evaluation. Bulgaria's plan, on the other hand, had been returned for revisions. In the case of the Netherlands, due to issues surrounding the formation of a new government, no plan was available for analysis. Therefore, the analysis was based on a draft plan prepared by the outgoing government, with the expectation that it would undergo minimal changes under the new government since it comprised the same political parties. For countries outside the EU, NRs were tasked with identifying policies with objectives similar to those of NRRPs, specifically aimed at socioeconomic recovery from the pandemic's impact. These policies were proposed by NRs and selected through consultation with the main author of the report and other consortium partners[3].

Using a specific questionnaire, NRs were asked to address: the content of the plans, the policy process, and the reactions of civil society organisations (CSOs) to the plans. For the purposes of this chapter, the analysis is focused on the content of the plans (for further elaboration, see Cibin et al., 2022).

In relation to the content of the plans, the questionnaire asked first about the projects, actions, or measures that addressed sex-gender inequalities in the domains of the project (e.g., gender-based violence, work and labour market, economy, etc.), putting an emphasis on any explicit mention of intersecting grounds. Then, the questionnaire inquired about the measures that mitigated inequalities for other vulnerable groups, defined by the inequality grounds of race/ethnicity, class, age, disability, nationality, religion or belief, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other grounds the researcher might identify. Again, the researcher was asked to mention explicit references to intersections among these grounds. A summary of the researcher's assessment was also included, where

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3   The list of the policies analysed in the non-EU27 countries is in Cibin et al. (2022, p. 14).

the overall orientation of the NRRP from a gender+ perspective was described, highlighting, when possible, the explicit reference of any measures introduced to address the needs made evident during the pandemic.

For the analysis of the plan's content, NRs were not required to read and analyse the document in its entirety. Instead, they were instructed to search for relevant information within the plan itself and any attached documentation. This could be accomplished by referring to the plan's index, reviewing introductory sections, and conducting keyword searches (e.g., gender, inequalities, minorities, etc.). The data collection and analysis took place between December 2021 and January 2022.

A recovery without gender+: Insights from RESISTIRÉ

As indicated above, this section presents the findings of the analysis carried out on the content of the recovery plans (and equivalent policies in non-EU countries). It first sets out the limitations inherent to the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the normative framework that underpins the drafting of the plans, as a preliminary step to the subsequent analysis of the national plans. The section then illustrates the core findings from the analysis of the national recovery and resilience plans, examining to what extent the plans introduce measures to tackle gender+ inequalities, and how are these inequalities understood.

The struggles over gender in the recovery and resilience facility

According to the Regulation establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility (EU, 2021), the national recovery plans should address a broad set of challenges, identified in six pillars: green transition; digital transformation; smart, sustainable and inclusive growth; social and territorial cohesion; health, economic, social and institutional resilience (with a focus on crisis responsiveness); and policies for the next generation. The European Commission mandated that 37% of the planned expenditures should contribute to climate transition, with a minimum of 20% allocated to digital transition (Cibin et al., 2022). Conversely, gender equality was not included as a pillar, thus it was not allocated a specific budget.

Instead, gender equality was mentioned in the preamble as a cross-cutting priority, acknowledging *women* as one of the social groups most severely impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. The Recovery and Resilience Facility identified the mitigation of the pandemic's social and economic consequences, particularly on *women*, as a central objective. It emphasised that Member States should

incorporate gender equality objectives throughout the planning and implementation stages of their recovery and resilience plans, therefore mentioning gender mainstreaming. Furthermore, it underscored the significance of investing in robust care infrastructure to promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment, enabling greater female participation in paid work and, consequently, positively affecting GDP (EU, 2021). However, this mention of the significance of care infrastructure had no legal implications for the use of the funding (Elomäki & Kantola, 2023, p. 343).

In the guidance document for preparing the recovery plans, elaborated by the European Commission on the basis of the Recovery and Resilience Facility Regulation (EC, 2021), it was clarified that Member States were expected to substantiate how the measures identify significant national gender equality challenges, especially those exacerbated by the pandemic, elucidate how their proposed reforms and investments will address these issues, ensure that gender equality objectives are integrated across all six pillars, and present gender-disaggregated data whenever feasible (EU, 2021). The guidance document also underscored the relevance of aligning plans with the European Pillar of Social Rights, the UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality, national gender equality strategies, and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the rights of other vulnerable populations.

Despite these references to gender equality and gender mainstreaming, it is argued that the Recovery and Resilience Facility did not create the conditions to properly mainstream gender equality in the recovery plans, nor it mentioned intersectionality, despite it being a cross-cutting principle of the EU Gender Equality Strategy (EIGE, 2023, p. 49). Among the main shortcomings of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, gender equality did not receive a dedicated budget, and didn't appear among the eleven primary criteria used by the European Commission to assess the plans (Sapala, 2021). Additionally, no reference was made to the care sector, which has been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and is often associated with women's responsibilities (Barry & Jennings, 2021, p. 73).

These shortcomings can be explained by the political struggles that surrounded the earlier debates on the recovery fund at the European institutional level. While the European Commission's proposal only mentioned gender equality cursorily, without establishing objectives or requirements for the recovery fund (EC, 2020b), the European Parliament achieved to integrate gender equality at least to some extent. Despite urgent procedures set up during the crisis, and restrictions on parliamentary work, a coordinated effort of feminist members of the economic and budgetary committees from different political

parties succeeded to include gender in the recovery fund (Elomäki & Kantola, 2023). In the struggle, however, 'gender-related' issues were diluted into the concern for 'women', and care economy and the care deal were side-lined.

Overall, advocacy efforts and pressures from civil society (Sapala, 2021; Klatzer & Rinaldi, 2020), along with the intervention of the European Parliament proved to be crucial. According to Elomäki and Kantola (2023), gender mainstreaming seemed to work in the context of the pandemic crisis policymaking, despite the hostility characterising the field of economic policy, and opposition by some political parties.

As argued in Cibin and colleagues (2022, p. 18), existing discussions and literature on gender equality in the national recovery plans have highlighted the underrepresentation of women's perspective, implementation difficulties concerning gender equality objectives, and the potential risk of job creation primarily benefiting men, who are disproportionately represented in the sectors of the green and digital transitions (Sapala, 2021). Moreover, a cross-country comparative study noted how gender equality is side-lined in most of the plans, with substantial differences across countries, which reflect their pre-pandemic performance on gender equality (Zarra & Ceron, 2021). Both Zapala and Ceron (2021), and EIGE (2023) identified the Spanish plan as one of the best performers, and the only one explicitly mentioning intersectionality as a cross-cutting approach to the plan. Yet, despite the plan's professed dedication to intersectionality, it fails to address the specific inequalities experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) individuals, and include measures to address them (EIGE, 2023, p. 52).

The analysis of the national recovery and resilience plans

The primary objective of RESISTIRÉ analysis was to determine whether the recovery plans and similar policies adequately addressed gender inequalities and related disparities within the context of the project's approach, especially those exacerbated during the pandemic.

As noted above, previous analyses of recovery plans raised concerns about the insufficient level of gender mainstreaming in the plans. The primary finding of our analysis indicates that the documents under scrutiny often addressed gender-related issues and vulnerable groups in a vague and generalised manner or as secondary outcomes of measures aimed at achieving other objectives (Cibin et al., 2022, p. 19).

The central focus of attention in the plans was the domain of work and the labour market, mentioned in 81% of the plans (21 plans), followed by education,

with 77% (20 plans), and the gender care gap, acknowledged in 73% (19 plans). Despite the increased attention to gender-based violence during the pandemic, the majority of plans neglected this issue, with only 31% of the plans (8 in total) including measures in this regard. Similarly, the domains of environmental justice and decision-making and politics received relatively less attention, with 46% (12 plans) and 42% (11 plans) respectively (Cibin et al., 2022, p. 19).

As to the inequality grounds, age is the most present inequality addressed in the plans (25 plans), followed by social class/socioeconomic background (24 plans), and disability (81% of the plans). Nationality and ethnicity appear in nearly half of the plans. NRs stressed the presence of factors such as geography (e.g., urban vs rural) and employment status, which can be associated to intersecting inequalities of race and class, but also inequalities related to digital access, the consequences of being prisoners, and health status (Cibin et al., 2022, p. 22). Remarkable absences are religion and belief, gender identity, and sexual orientation, which are almost completely neglected in the plans.

Several points of concern were identified regarding the way the NRRPs deal with gender+ issues, ranging from the complete lack of measures to the presence of mere general statements and a lack of concrete actions. After exploring those shortcomings, the following paragraphs will review those measures that have been identified as positive examples in terms of attention to gender+ issues, based on the assessment of national researchers.

As mentioned above, the analysis indicates a general absence of the use of a gender+ approach among the various plans and policies observed (e.g., in Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands Poland, Portugal, Sweden), showing how intersectionality is still relegated to academic research and far from being explicitly acknowledged in policymaking. The only plan explicitly mentioning intersectionality is the Spanish one, although as mentioned above, EIGE raised some concerns as to the absence of measures addressing LGBTIQ+ inequalities. The absence of gender+ reflects a general resistance to acknowledging gender equality at all. Indeed, NRs pointed out that in some of the recovery plans, there is a struggle over the use of terms like 'gender equality' (e.g., Türkiye), and intersecting inequalities are not specifically named. This was the case for the French plan which used the term 'inequality of opportunity' (and sometimes of 'destiny'), concerning 'vulnerable groups' in general, a category used to point at socioeconomic and ethnicity grounds, as the French NR pointed out. Yet, words like 'migrant', 'refugee', 'nationality', 'religion', and 'sexual orientation' do not appear in the text.

As the German NR put it, the + perspective was missing, because 'there is no relation made to e.g., women with migratory background or women with

disabilities. All the additional perspectives on gender (refugees, social inequality, etc.) are mentioned separately but without referring in particular to gender' (DE_ NR).[4] Following a similar line, the Hungarian NR derives the lack of gender+ approach from the 'lack of reforms and measures planned for the various target groups of women particularly affected by the epidemic' (HU_NR) (see also the Bulgarian one). These two assessments represent a generalised view among NRs about gender+ as the presence of measures targeting specific subgroups of women, what has been called political intersectionality, or an understanding of intersectionality in terms of 'identity politics'.

In most cases when gender+ issues surfaced in the texts, this occurred through general statements that acknowledged their existence in a specific national context and the importance of addressing them. Yet declarations remain superficial and do not lead to the development of concrete solutions to gender+ inequalities. For example, the NR from Iceland found a lack of concrete measures to mitigate gender+ inequalities and in particular notes that '[…] the government needs to more firmly address gender+ inequalities in relation to, e.g., unpaid care work, GBV, poverty, and health issues' (IS_NR).

Some NRs frame this issue as a rhetorical use of gender equality as an empty vessel: on paper, some plans are even well-written texts that refer to gender+ inequalities (Finland) and claim to adopt measures with a positive impact in curbing them. Yet, measures are so vague that it is not possible to assess their impact on reducing gender gaps (e.g., Austria, Bulgaria, Lithuania). In relation to the Spanish plan, CSOs spoke of a 'pink washing' operation, since the claims made in the plan are not followed by concrete measures and investments (Cibin et al., 2022, p. 104).

Another criticism regards insufficient or absent funding allocation to gender-sensitive measures, which makes the measures ineffective from the start. The NR from the UK notes that the funding available to finance hubs that support disadvantaged families does not fully compensate for the cuts made before the pandemic. Funds to address female genital mutilation are also scarce and temporary, as their availability is not guaranteed after 2022. There is no discussion of the long-term sustainability of these actions. Similarly, in Spain, it is observed that

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4   The quotations in this section are taken from the questionnaires completed by national researchers. To identify the author of the quotation, reference is made to the country code, followed by the acronym used for national researchers (NRs), as in Cibin et al. (2022, p. 15).

limited funding allocation to the pillar on social policies, as opposed to green and digital transition, is unsuited to the objectives allegedly pursued.

Sectorial treatment of gender+ issues is also observed. When dealt with, gender+ is mostly addressed in the field of social policies, but neglected in the domains of economy, energy efficiency/environment. Gender impacts are more clearly developed and connected to concrete measures when it comes to housing and the labour market domains (e.g., Portugal, Estonia).

A 'silos' approach persisted across some of the plans, with measures tackling specific vulnerable groups, but overlooking intersectional aspects. As the Portuguese NR put it, 'inequalities are addressed by items, forgetting that often they accumulate in the same person' (PT_NR). In the Bulgarian plan, for example, the NR identified measures addressing social class, age, and disability as inequality grounds, without addressing any intersection with gender. In this line, the Greek NR pointed out that training measures aimed at increasing digital skills among the elderly, training for the integration of refugees and Greek Roma, as well as training for STEM among high school children, with a gender quota established for girls, prioritised or focused on specific vulnerable groups.

There are exceptions, nonetheless. Some plans tried to acknowledge the relevance of intersecting inequalities and illustrate the positive impact that some measures would have on those inequalities. This is the case, particularly with measures that tackle gender and social class, through investments in public transportation, energetic poverty, fuel poverty, social services, and social housing. Improving public transportation and affordable access to it would support women and low-income people, who travel less by car or don't have one (Austrian plan); female-headed households would specifically benefit from measures against energetic poverty and fuel poverty (respectively, the Spanish and French plans). The Austrian plan finds that energy poverty initiatives (modernisation of heating systems through renewable energies, and incentives to social housing providers to invest in modernisation) are beneficial for elderly poor women who cannot afford to pay heating bills. Similarly, the Italian plan describes actions improving social services and social housing as a way to empower women and fight against gender discrimination and gender-based violence 'in the area of material poverty and housing hardship' (IT_NR). Similarly, the Croatian NR indicated as a gender+ measure the allocation of 50% of the Guaranteed Minimum Income Benefit (GMIB) for 'homeless people, survivors of violence, and victims of crisis who are accommodated in shelters during the crisis' (HR_NR).

Other measures in which the NRs found an intersectional dimension are those regarding the labour market. These are generally measures targeting specific groups (e.g., single mothers, victims of violence, long-term unemployed)

and improving their access to the labour market (Croatia). The Greek plan foresaw a series of measures to increase diversity in the labour market, such as strengthening the body that collects data on diversity in the labour market, introducing incentives for companies that hire more workers from diverse groups, to enhance intersectional diversity, and developing a horizontal training program to promote diversity in the labour market. Mainstreaming gender in active employment policies is also flagged as a sector with potential intersectional impacts, as the policy expressly tackles ageism and discrimination against long-term unemployed adults, and youth unemployment (Spain). Additionally, the Spanish plan foresaw measures to foster the employability of women in rural areas, and of victims of violence.

Initiatives to improve childcare services, thus addressing the gender care gap and supporting the integration of women with children in the labour market are also found in Greece under the measures with an intersectional lens. The Greek plan aimed to create new child-care units (especially for children under the age of two), including day care centres in private companies, and a special program of care for children with disability. In the Slovakian plan, it is argued that measures for improving care services (particularly early development care, and early childhood education) target both children and their mothers, potentially improving the Roma women's position in their communities and in the labour market. Moreover, initiatives to prevent early school dropouts consider girls' vulnerability to domestic violence or early pregnancy. Conversely, some measures to improve childcare services are regarded as insufficient to tackle intersecting inequalities. For example, while pursuing equal opportunities 'regardless of background', the UK policy 'Recovery Premium and Schools COVID-19 Operational Guidance' only allocates specific funds and extra support for those with disabilities and special educational needs, neglecting the 'specific issues of children and young people in regard to gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, race and ethnicity, religion or nationality' (UK_NR). The German plan foresees measures to extend childcare for children who need to strengthen their competences, and the creation of childcare spaces open beyond the traditional working hours. Yet, gender-sensitive measures are limited to 'broader child-care', and the '+ perspective' is missing, as the NR argued. Instead, the 'New Care Economy' policy, foreseen in the Spanish plan, does not seem to address patterns of gender+ inequalities at the intersection with racialisation, particularly concerning the informal care sector.

In the domain of health, the only plan that specifically foresaw the improvement of working conditions and salaries of workers in the health system, the majority of whom are women, was the French one. Other interventions in this

field mainly focused on incorporating digital technologies as a solution to allow 'vulnerable groups to receive medical consultations during the pandemic' (Denmark). Some intersections between sex/gender, ethnicity, and social class are found in the Romanian plan, which foresaw the introduction of ten mobile medical units to screen for breast and cervical cancer, which will be used in disadvantaged areas with a focus on Roma communities.

Intersections without gender are also found in measures directed at fighting energy poverty in households where people with disability live (Cyprus), and in statements acknowledging the risk of discrimination in the labour market and unemployment for young adults and people with a migratory background (Germany). The concern for youth and employment is found also in the Estonian plan, which mentions the importance of focusing on young people without higher education degrees. Instead, the Dutch draft is concerned with young people with lower socioeconomic backgrounds, but measures addressing this are mentioned only once in the plan. In the domain of education, the Spanish plan foresaw investments in centres for unaccompanied migrant children and children with special needs. Additional pedagogical support for vulnerable children between 0 and 5 years old is found in the Danish plan.

While neither gender nor the '+' are explicitly addressed in most plans, NRs found actions that could have an indirect positive impact on these issues. Changes in the healthcare system, and particularly long-term care, and working conditions, are found to have an impact on women, due to the structure of the labour market (Poland, Slovenia). As the Estonian NR argued, 'at present care of the elderly is largely shouldered by families and falls on women; thus, this reform has a strong gender+ impact, even if it is not highlighted in the text explicitly' (EE_NR). The NR from Iceland noticed that some actions that relate to economic protection and financing of health and elderly care services could have a positive impact on gender+ equality. It is found that general social cohesion measures are also supposed to produce indirect benefits for unidentified social groups (Italy). Other aspects are highlighted as positive, such as having gender equality and attention to youth as cross-cutting strategies (Italy), or strengthening digital competencies (Slovenia). In some cases, the use of the term 'gender equality' instead of equal opportunities is regarded as a positive step forward (Romania), and even though gender mainstreaming was not fully implemented across all areas, 'the very presence of many gender+ dimensions' is a positive development (Estonia).

Looking ahead: Challenges and lessons learned to incorporate intersectionality in policy-making in times of crisis

The lessons learned from the analysis performed by RESISTIRÉ offer valuable insights that can inspire a more inclusive approach to crisis management, placing intersectionality at the forefront. RESISTIRÉ's analysis shows that a siloed approach is still prevalent in policymaking, although highly unsuited to tackle structures and mechanisms that mutually reinforce each other.

Looking at the framework designed by Hankivsky and colleagues (2014), there are several shortcomings that prevent a thorough intersectionality-based analysis. In particular, most of the plans dismiss gender equality in few lines with cursory assessments of the problem and limited (if any) data to support the statements made on gender impacts. This makes it difficult to ask the first 'descriptive questions' about the plans under analysis, namely what is the problem represented to be in the plan, how has this representation come about, how are groups differentially affected by such understanding of the problem, and what are the current policy solutions in place to address it (Hankivsky et al., 2014).

This is a first telling indication that gender mainstreaming was not carried out, starting from its absence in the Recovery and Resilience Facility. The absence of gender mainstreaming negatively affected the possibility to incorporate intersectionality, understood as a gender+ approach to intersecting inequalities. For gender mainstreaming to be effectively implemented, it is crucial to build the support structure, with allocated resources, and create and sustain the competencies among people, to enable and sustain transformation of practices and institutions (EIGE, 2016), even or especially in times of crisis. Future crisis management plans should adopt a mainstream approach to intersectionality, recognising and addressing the challenges faced by individuals and groups at the intersections of various inequalities. This involves considering diverse expertise in policy formulation. Moreover, thorough gender mainstreaming would avoid the sectorial integration of gender+ to specific fields, which leaves unquestioned the domains where gendered inequalities are more entrenched (e.g., economy).

A key aspect for effective gender mainstreaming is the funding allocation. Inadequate funding undermines the effectiveness of measures. As highlighted in the previous section, gender equality was not included as one of the pillars of the RRF, nor was it allocated specific funding. Policymakers should commit to sufficient and sustained funding for gender-sensitive, intersectional and inclusive measures. Fostering the long-term impact of such funding is crucial for building resilient societies. In Linková and colleagues (2022), it was recommended that

rules to distribute funds under the recovery scheme 'tie concrete mechanisms and criteria of gender mainstreaming to concrete actions, measures, and responsibilities, beyond general rhetoric and contextual information'. This approach would compel governments to develop concrete actions and carry out thorough gender impact assessments of the policy outcomes proposed.

Despite these shortcomings, NRs have identified measures that address gender+ inequalities. When assessing a policy in terms of gender+ or intersectional approach, a tendency to look for measures targeting specific subgroups of women or vulnerable groups was observed, among the NRs. This approach exemplifies one of the different understandings of intersectionality, namely intersection of identities, or intersection of strands, as understood in policy analysis (Christoffersen, 2021). Oftentimes, NRs mapped the presence of measures addressing separate inequality grounds, thus looking into another understanding of intersectionality (multiple, additive approach, or multi strand). Conversely, in the case of the recovery plans, it was difficult to carry out a broader analysis of the impact of the measures in terms of their ability to change the intersecting structures of power, thus addressing the structural understanding of intersectionality.

As it appears from the section above, most of the measures NRs identified as intersectional or potentially addressing gender+ inequalities focused on gender and social class, with an emphasis on the domains of the labour market, the gender care gap, and access to social services. However, some of the proposed solutions, namely digitalisation, and training, which appear to be magic wands able to solve long-term structural issues, are problematic and reveal stereotyped assumptions underpinning the problem representation. For example, presenting measures such as training for women, migrants or the youth as an effective action to overcome inequalities in the labour market conveys the idea that inequalities stem from the lack of competencies of these groups. Besides lacking empirical support, this argument overshadows the structural mechanisms that prevent women and other vulnerable groups from accessing the labour market or remaining in it.

An in-depth analysis of problem representation and its outcomes often requires time to be fully articulated and this wasn't possible for several reasons. First, the plans themselves lacked in-depth information on the concrete measures proposed, and they usually did not use gender mainstreaming tools to gather data and properly assess the gender impacts of the foreseen actions. As a result, NRs were confronted with limited information to carry out a thorough analysis and focused their attention on those measures that explicitly targeted subgroups of women or specific intersectional identities.

Lack of information was also coupled with limited time allocated to analyse the plans themselves, which were usually extremely long documents. To facilitate NRs' task, it was suggested to look for specific keywords in the document, to have a general overview of the content and grasp explicit mentions of gender and intersectional issues. This approach necessarily limited the depth of the analysis that could be carried out in terms of the non-explicit impacts of policies on gender+ issues. Moreover, the questionnaire sought to collect a large amount of information on relevant measures in the nine domains of the project, looking at gender and its intersection with nine inequality grounds. Thus, a words limit was set for the replies in each section of the questionnaire, to ensure the feasibility of the subsequent data analysis. Due to these elements, the resulting assessments could be partial or rather focused on the key (or more visible) aspects of the plan. A recommendation for future research projects that address intersectionality-based policy analysis is the need for more time and space, to thoroughly articulate the structural aspects and impacts of the policies under analysis. Indeed, the complexity of intersectionality-based policy analysis indicates that time and resources are needed to gather meaningful results.

In terms of policymaking, RESISTIRÉ has shed light on the importance to embed intersectionality in policy language. However, this wouldn't be enough, without an explicit acknowledgement of intersecting inequalities and their impact in practice. Policy solutions should be aimed at addressing these inequalities, both in their design and implementation phase. This aspect is all the more essential in the crisis context, to avoid policy responses that exacerbate existing inequalities and ensure that they redress them instead. In RESISTIRÉ, a specific approach to intersectionality was suggested, with gender as the fixed axis that intersect with other inequalities of class, race, age, disability, etc. Such understanding allows avoiding the risk of diluting attention to gender issues, while incorporating intersectionality (Barrère, 2010). Indeed, when incorporating intersectional concerns, the analysis often risks losing sight of gender as the primary inequality, or anchor, and shifts the attention onto general vulnerable groups, identified by one or more intersecting inequality grounds. The category of 'vulnerable group' then tends to polarise the attention on the individual's or the group's unique experiences, rather than the mechanisms or structures that placed them at disadvantage, which should be the target of policy action.

Furthermore, while attention to certain subgroups of women, placed at the intersection of several axes of inequality (e.g., rural women, elderly women, racialised women), is an important step towards recognising the complex reality of inequality, the risk of atomising experiences should be taken into account (McCrudden, 2011).

COVID-19 was a public health crisis, and showed that health policies often lack gender-sensitive components. Future health crisis management plans should explicitly address gender disparities, considering the unique healthcare needs of diverse groups. This includes recognising the intersection of gender with race/ethnicity, class, and other inequality grounds and getting inspiration from successful measures identified in the analysis. Other initiatives addressing public transportation, energy efficiency, childcare services, and labour market diversity can also serve as models for future crisis management plans.

Moving beyond policy design, a key issue for the assessment of the plans will be the implementation phase, and the extent to which a gender+ approach will be integrated into the process of monitoring and evaluation (Linková et al., 2022, p. 3). Policy actors should commit to ongoing evaluation of crisis management plans, adapting strategies based on feedback and changing circumstances. This iterative process ensures responsiveness to evolving intersectional challenges. It is crucial that the monitoring and evaluation process foreseen by the European Commission take into account a gender+ approach (Linková et al., 2022).

If the RESISTIRÉ analysis has made one thing clear, it is that civil society plays a crucial role in holding policymakers accountable. Future crisis management plans should actively involve civil society organisations, ensuring diverse voices are heard, and intersectional coalitions are built, in order to guarantee the adoption of equitable solutions.

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Ayşe Gül Altınay and Sofia Strid

'Better stories' of feminist+ witnessing and co-creativity in dark times: Epilogue

Introduction

> *There is always a better story than the better story.*
>
> —Dina Georgis

> *Even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth.*
>
> —Hannah Arendt

> *Ring the bells that still can ring.*
> *Forget your perfect offering.*
> *There is a crack in everything.*
> *That's how the light gets in.*
>
> —Leonard Cohen

The RESISTIRÉ journey can be summarised as a collective inquiry into the 'better stories' of responding to 'dark times', a search for the 'cracks' where the light gets in and an invitation to expand those cracks through collective wisdom and creativity[1]. Grounding itself in feminist scholar Dina Georgis' concept of 'the better story' both as a theoretical lens and a methodological tool, RESISTIRÉ has used its wide web of national researchers to 'listen queerly' (Georgis, 2013) and make visible the wisdom and creativity expressing itself in individual narratives, collective civic action and policies responding to the multi-layered challenges of the pandemic.

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1   As the co-authors of this chapter, we have the difficult task of reflecting on a collective journey in our own situated voice(s). Views expressed in this article are based on more than two years of collective learning and co-creation, and yet, they do not represent the full diversity of voices and viewpoints among our consortium partners. We are grateful for this immensely enriching journey of co-learning and co-theorizing, and, at the same time, claim full responsibility for the views expressed here.

The different chapters in this book have already discussed our learnings based on more than two years of RESISTIRÉ research, as well as the new questions and curiosities that arise from them. We would like to use the space of this Epilogue to elaborate on our journey with 'the better story' as a theoretical lens and methodology that values, encourages and makes visible creativity and collective wisdom emerging from different contexts and to explore the transformative potentials of such a methodology for enabling co-creation and democratising knowledge production towards greater inclusion, engagement and innovation – especially when it incorporates a feminist+ lens.[2]

In what follows, we first discuss our choice of 'the better story' as a theoretical lens and methodological tool and then reflect on the ways in which it has helped us explore three sets of research questions:

1. What can we learn from the existing better stories of individual, civil society and policy responses to the pandemic?
2. How can we collectively and co-creatively imagine even better stories of responding to this crisis that we have all shared, but have not been equally affected by?
3. How can a feminist+ lens help us explore, make visible and co-create better stories of inclusive policies, initiatives, and practices?

And finally, we reflect on the experience of RESISTIRÉ itself as a better story of (consortium) research.

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2 "The + is a reminder of the many other frameworks of analysis and action that have helped feminism grow: The anti-slavery, anti-colonial, anti-war, anti-capitalist, human rights, minority rights, economic justice and racial justice movements that have accompanied feminisms globally; the LGBTIQ+ movements that have deepened our understanding of the workings of gender and sexuality; and the ecological and climate justice movements that remind us of our interconnectedness not just with each other but with all species, with all life, to name a few. The + is a reminder of how feminisms have been transformed by these other struggles towards an open-ended vision that serves all life. It's possible to view the + also as a reminder of our beautiful diversity as the subjects of feminism, of the intersectionality and interconnectedness that was always there, but not always acknowledged. As Dina Georgis reminds us 'there is always a better story than our better story' (Georgis, 2013, p. 26). The + is an invitation for opening ourselves up, personally and collectively, to a better story of feminism, one that is shaped by curiosity, openness, creativity and modesty" (Altınay, 2022, cited in Altınay & Pető, 2022, pp. 478–479).

Why 'better story'?

There is a long history of theorising on the power of stories and storytelling for meaning-making, survival and transformation. For Hannah Arendt, (critical) storytelling is key to surviving and illuminating the 'dark times' (Arendt, 1968; see Disch, 1994). Feminist theorising has paid ample attention to the potentials of storytelling as a political tool. In her powerful *Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway (1991, p. 175) writes:

> Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other. (...) The tools are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities.

Feminists and others have used stories and storytelling to draw attention to the ways in which hegemonic narratives cannot account for the lives of those 'marked as other' and to reveal the diversity of ways lives, relationships and events can be experienced and narrated. Storytelling has strategically and creatively been used to draw attention to dehumanisation (which often leads to the normalisation of violence): 'We are not numbers' has been a common outcry by communities experiencing discrimination and violence.

In her book *The Better Story,* Georgis (2013, p. 1) explores 'the value of stories for making insights into collective histories and group identity' suggesting that 'stories give us access to the deeply human qualities of how political histories get written from the existential experience of trauma, loss, difficulty, and relationality'. Resonating with Georgis, the RESISTIRÉ approach to stories has been based on an understanding of the story as 'the principle of how we make sense of human experience' and stories as 'resources for political imagination and for political renewal' (Georgis, 2013, p. 1). Working with and making visible diverse stories of survival and transformation (both at the individual and the collective level) has been a key focus in RESISTIRÉ.

> The better story, as the principle of creation and surviving difficult experience, is also the principle of how people collectively share a story to survive better. It stages the dilemmas and problems that emerge from how we are fundamentally dependent on each other: for pleasure, for security, for recognition (Georgis, 2013, p. 13).

Surviving a difficult experience and how to collectively survive better have been key questions of the pandemic times. And yet, we knew that, at any given moment and place, there was more than one collective story of survival. As we engaged in an exploration of surviving the pandemic across Europe, our feminist+ lens kept us alert about the need to recognise and make visible the diversity

of personal and collective better stories, resulting as much from intersecting inequalities as from the plethora of emergent possibilities and imaginaries. The focus on 'stories' also served as a reminder of the need for humility in the face of the layers of suffering we were witnessing and of the scarcity of frameworks to make sense of this unprecedented experience.

So, why 'the better story'? What is the significance of 'the better' in Georgis' theorising, and in ours?

> A term like 'the better story' often creates a knee-jerk reaction in academic and activist conversations. Are we expected to tell rosy stories in the midst of suffering? Is this a way of undermining or trivialising the workings of power to the great detriment of certain groups of people? Where are structural inequalities in our search for better stories? For Dina Georgis, and for us, the search for the better story is a search for the possibility of addressing both structural injustice and how people creatively and collectively respond to and transform it, of creating a political space both for mourning and grief, and for solidarity and joy. (Altınay & Pető, 2022, pp. 482–83)

Along the lines of what Ayşe Gül Altınay and Andrea Pető discuss here, RESISTIRÉ has taken Georgis' theorisation of 'the better story' as an invitation to critically address both structural injustices (focusing on the layers of intersecting inequalities deepened or created by the pandemic) and the plethora of personal and collective actions aimed at critiquing and transforming structures of injustice (focusing on the lives of individuals who have been made the most vulnerable during the pandemic, civil society initiatives from across Europe, as well as local-regional-national-EU level policies)[1].

This invitation has come with its challenges. On the one hand, the 'knee-jerk reaction in academic and activist conversations' towards the concept of 'the better story' was occasionally there in our workshops and Open Studios (Kerremans et al., 2023) (see Chapter 3). Behind these reactions, often, were rightful cautions against white-washing and a strong sense of responsibility to highlight systemic injustices, which resonated with critical feminist analyses of the workings of power in the context of the pandemic (see Al-Ali, 2020). On the other hand, we have observed a tendency, mostly among policymakers, to minimise the unequal impact of pandemic policies or to justify them with reference to

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1   No group or individual is 'naturally' vulnerable, but are rather 'made vulnerable' through historical and present structures of inequality and injustice. Although our reporting and writing have sometimes used the shorthand of 'vulnerable groups', throughout our research, we have paid close attention to refrain from assuming vulnerability or privilege, and from normalising their making.

economic, political or other constraints (Cibin et al., 2022). The concept of 'the better story' as developed by Dina Georgis (2013) and adopted by the RESISTIRÉ team enabled us to respond to both challenges by inviting a radical critique of inequalities with an insistence on the possibility of imaginative alternatives for greater equality. As Georgis reminds us, 'there is always a better story than the better story' (Georgis, 2013, p. 26).

Better for whom? Better according to whom? These are legitimate and important questions to ask for any claim about 'the better'. For RESISTIRÉ, there was some clarity about the definition of better from the beginning: Better meant more egalitarian and more inclusive. Better also meant amplifying the voices of those who were not being heard. With the intersectional feminist+ lens it adopted, RESISTIRÉ chose not to foreclose the answers to the questions regarding 'for whom?' and 'according to whom?' and instead sought to create transparent, open, (self) critical spaces for diverse groups of participants to explore what it would mean to be more egalitarian and more inclusive in research, activism and policy alike. As we will discuss below, this involved asking the question 'who is missing?' at every point in the research process and at every gathering. The co-creative three-cycle methodology of RESISTIRÉ (see Chapter 2), with in-built feedback loops between the research cycles, allowed us to change direction and create new research agendas based on the question 'who is missing' and use the next cycle to go after the stories of those we had missed (Sandström & Strid, 2022; Sandström et al., 2023; Živković et al., 2022). In other words, for RESISTIRÉ, 'the better' never had a fixed definition or destination. It remained an open question, an open invitation for all, including ourselves.

Why 'better stories' and not 'best practices'? We took Dina Georgis' (2013) invitation to be one about paying close attention to context and creativity, about exploring the 'better story' of each moment, each context. Ours was not a search for a 'perfect fix for all' or 'our perfect offering' (à la Cohen) but an invitation to identify, highlight and learn from the better stories of individual, civic and policy responses to existing inequalities in different contexts, as well as an invitation to imagine even better stories of response and transformation. The move away from (the pretence of) perfectionism is a move away from colonising forms of top-down knowledge production, or what Haraway (1991, p. 188) would call 'a conquering gaze from nowhere', and a move towards humility, compassion, deep listening and co-learning. Not being clouded with pre-established judgments or ideas regarding what is 'best', as RESISTIRÉ researchers, we were able to keep an open mind and heart to witness, learn from and disseminate the infinite forms of creativity and collective wisdom finding expression in different contexts. This

enabled an authentic and dynamic co-learning and co-creation process (which we will elaborate further below).

From the beginning, RESISTIRÉ was committed to developing creative and working responses to the harsh realities of the pandemic, for which Georgis' conceptualisation of 'the better story' became a powerful tool to practise what Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (2022, p. 3) call 'active hope':

> Passive hope is about waiting for external agencies to bring about what we desire. Active Hope is about becoming active participants in bringing about what we hope for. Active Hope is a practice. Like tai chi or gardening, it is something we do rather than have. It is a process we can apply to any situation, and it involves three key steps. First, we take in a clear view of reality; second, we identify what we hope for in terms of the direction we'd like things to move in or the values we'd like to see expressed; and third, we take steps to move ourselves or our situation in that direction. Since Active Hope doesn't require our optimism, we can apply it even in areas where we feel hopeless. The guiding impetus is intention; we choose what we aim to bring about, act for, or express. Rather than weighing our chances and proceeding only when we feel hopeful, we focus on our intention and let it be our guide.

The three steps that Macy and Johnstone (2022, p. 3) identify in their discussion of Active Hope as practice were there throughout RESISTIRÉ research. First, using multiple tools and methodologies (mapping of policy and civil society responses, narrative research with individuals located in communities made most vulnerable during the pandemic, analyses of surveys and other quantitative data) we sought to co-develop 'a clear view of reality' (see Chapter 2); second, we invited activists, artists, policy makers, researchers, union organisers, (health) care professionals and other key actors into workshops and Open Studios to tap into the collective wisdom and creativity for identifying the promising directions and core values (see Chapter 3); and third, we took steps (pilot projects, policy recommendations, academic and other publications) 'to move ourselves or our situation' in those directions (see Chapters 2 and 5). For RESISTIRÉ, there was no single direction but multiple directions; a multi-faceted journey towards enacting and enabling better stories of responding to the global crisis of the pandemic based on 'situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1991). We took the invitation of 'the better story' as an invitation to look into the eye of what is difficult and painful with an open heart and an open mind, with compassion and curiosity, with humility and passion, with recognition and resolve to make it better step by step – seeming contradictions creatively enabling us to enact 'active hope'. While the first two research cycles shined light on the increasing inequalities and marginalisations, in the third cycle, RESISTIRÉ's search for active hope was coupled with a search for strategic agency in marginalised communities (Lister,

2021). With a focus on gender+ inequalities, we inquired into the possibilities and enactments of strategic agency, with a focus on what enabled or hindered its expression (Sandström et al., 2023).

In the next three sections, we briefly discuss the ways in which the focus on better stories of survival and response to the pandemic has translated into research, co-creation and dissemination in the RESISTIRÉ journey.

Ethical witnessing and listening queerly

The first question that has shaped our collective work throughout RESISTIRÉ was: 'What can we learn from the existing better stories of individual, civil society and policy responses to the pandemic?' This question, alongside questions about the unequal impact of the pandemic on our research participants, was explored in all three cycles of the project through narrative research and workshops with experts (Axelsson et al., 2021; Sandström et al., 2022), the mapping of civil society and policy responses to the pandemic (Cibin et al., 2021, 2022, 2023), and the Open Studios (Kerremans et al., 2021; Kerremans & Denis, 2022, 2023). In the next sections, we will discuss how our learning through these multiple methodologies shaped the questions and themes in the Open Studios, the co-creation of pilot actions, and our final conferences and workshops in Brussels and Istanbul. Here, we would like to focus on the modality of listening and witnessing that shaped RESISTIRÉ's research journey including the book *(Better) Stories from the Pandemic* (Aglietti et al., 2023). In her insightful Foreword to the book, Dina Georgis (2023, p. 15) observes our choice of witnessing as a modality:

> [*(Better) Stories from the Pandemic*] makes space for people to be witnessed, not scrutinized or fixed. Their stories are not gleaned for data, nor is any single narrative interpreted. It is radical in its refusal to do so. The subjects of this archive are the authors of their better stories, sharing their experiences in their own way framed through how they see themselves and the world around them.

This was indeed a conscious choice that reflected our modality of listening and witnessing throughout the project. In various RESISTIRÉ reports and publications, the narratives were analysed together with other forms of qualitative and quantitative data, to challenge the dominant understandings of the pandemic experience with a focus on gender+ inequalities, but the modality of witnessing that Georgis observes in the book constituted the backbone of our approach. While the book *(Better) Stories from the Pandemic* is dedicated exclusively to the narratives of our research participants, the Factsheets (policy recommendations produced for decision-makers and policy-setters at all levels) have direct

quotations from these narratives, inviting the readers to witness and learn from their stories and analyses.

Who, what and how did we choose to witness? As we have already discussed, with an intersectional feminist+ lens, we chose to witness the stories of those individuals and communities that have been the most affected and made the most vulnerable during the pandemic, keeping the questions 'Who is missing? Whose perspective and experience are missing?' alive throughout RESISTIRÉ research.

What we chose to witness was very much shaped by our critical feminist+ lens: We chose to listen to the 'slow violence' (Nixon, 2011) experienced daily by the victims and survivors of systemic inequalities, as well as to overt forms of physical, sexual, racial violence experienced most dramatically by women, the LGBTIQ+, racialised minorities, migrants and refugees during the pandemic. More importantly, our intersectional lens alerted us to the interconnectedness of these different forms of violence. Inspired by Cynthia Cockburn's (2004) discussion of 'violence as a continuum', our RESISTIRÉ factsheet on better stories of crisis-response proposed approaching crisis as a continuum (Altinay et al., 2023b, p. 1):

> Building on Cynthia Cockburn's concept of violence as a continuum, we propose approaching crisis as a continuum, where the emphasis is placed on the interconnectedness of the different sites of crisis (the home, workplace, schools, hospitals, public spaces, etc.) and different moments of crisis (before, during, after). The most overt expression of a catastrophic event may occur within a limited timeframe or at a particular site, but its impact is not time- or site-bound. Moreover, a gender+ intersectional perspective suggests that we live in a world of interconnected, multiple crises: gender-based violence, poverty, racism, state violence, climate crisis, and other forms of slow violence and slow disaster.

The question of 'how' is as significant as the 'who' and the 'what' of witnessing. We chose to witness the stories of our research participants with humility, curiosity, respect and appreciation of their wisdom and creativity. This required deep listening and an alert attention to overt and subtle forms of (self) judgment, which we sought to bring to awareness, when we noticed them, especially in workshops and Open Studios or in our own reflections regarding our collective research experience. Literary scholar Irene Kacandes (2020) calls this form of witnessing 'co-witnessing':

> Whether you feel you had a grasp of these issues previously or acquired it recently, educating yourself about injustice done to others and then passing on what you've learned are first steps toward real change. I've called this process 'co-witnessing' and warned that it has to be accompanied by careful listening, true compassion, serious research,

humility about one's own role and its limitations, and naming the true victims rather than appropriating their victimhood.

For Kacandes (2020), the forms of co-witnessing that were made possible during the pandemic have the potential to transform the post-pandemic world. This is exactly the potential that RESISTIRÉ research (including its co-creative actions) has aimed to tap into.

Kacandes' discussion of co-witnessing resonates strongly with Dina Georgis' (2013, p. 18) calls for 'ethical witnessing':

> Ethical listening is (...) paradoxical: it attends to being affected but is neither disengaged nor wanting to master what it sees and hears. The job of listening to the better story is therefore not easy. The paradoxical imperative is to account for loss by noticing the enigmas of survival. Ethical witnessing recognizes its susceptibility to the story, but also stages its unthinkability.

In our podcast with her in May 2022 (Altınay & Georgis, 2022), Georgis highlighted the relationship between ethical witnessing and creativity: 'Our creative capacity is always there but not always something we are able to summon in ourselves', suggesting that listening to better stories acts as an invitation for being 'ethical witnesses of the radical desire for change', especially when we are able to 'create environments where people are encouraged to let that radical subjectivity come through for creating better futures'.

In the RESISTIRÉ experience, asking people – especially those who have been made the most vulnerable – about their better stories of responding to uncertainty and the layers of challenge that came with the pandemic, alongside their experiences of inequality and vulnerability, indeed acted as an invitation to encourage and invite narratives of what Georgis calls 'radical subjectivity'.

There is another, related, aspect of Georgis' discussion of ethical witnessing, that resonated strongly with us: 'Listening queerly'. For Georgis (2013, p. 10), ethical witnessing is based on 'listening queerly', where queer is not understood through the lens of sexual identity but invites an attention to 'unthinkability' and creativity. Here is an excerpt from our podcast (Altınay & Georgis, 2022) where Georgis articulates queerness in relation to radical subjectivity:

> Ayşe Gül Altınay: In your book, you focus on queer affects. From your experience, what would it mean to queer our better stories of responding to the pandemic? And what can we learn from better stories that present themselves as politically queer?
> Dina Georgis: It is incumbent upon us to witness queer radical subjectivities. It is not easy to pay attention to those. It is easy to dismiss radical expressions of subjectivity, as strange or anomalous. It is important, especially when we are working with communities, to listen queerly, to listen to those queer expressions. Because I think those are

key to the possibility of better futures. The important point here is to pay attention to what seems 'weird'. We need to be different kinds of witnesses to really pay attention to listen to people's queer radical responses because all of us have the capacity for radical subjectivity.

A: And to see the wisdom and creativity in those queer radical subjectivities...

D: Absolutely.

In the RESISTIRÉ experience, listening queerly and ethical witnessing of better stories have indeed enabled creative capacities and wisdom of individuals and communities to be summoned, acknowledged, and invited into a collective realm of co-witnessing and co-creation (see below). At the level of communities and civil society responses, this involved listening queerly for articulations of what Kathy Davis calls 'awkward politics'. Davis (2022, p. 517) uses Georgis' concept of 'the better story' to articulate the significance of looking into 'awkward politics': '"Awkward politics" compel us not to look away, but to continue to engage with the uncomfortable truths of a world where there are neither easy solutions nor rose-coloured futures. It is about "staying with the trouble" rather than avoiding it'. (Haraway, 2016). As we discuss below, it was inspirations from individual better stories and 'awkward politics' on the ground that led to the creative actions and policy recommendations developed by RESISTIRÉ.

Co-creating as co-witnesses

RESISTIRÉ was as much about co-creation as it was about co-witnessing. The second question we asked ourselves throughout the project was: How can we collectively and co-creatively imagine even better stories of responding to this crisis that we have all shared, but have not been equally affected by? (Cibin et al., 2023; Harroche et al., 2023; Kent et al., 2023). This question shaped our fourteen pan-European workshops with experts CO-organised in three waves by the partners from Belgium, the Czech Republic, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye and the UK (Axelsson et al., 2021; Sandström et al., 2022, 2023), where we invited and worked with more than 200 activists, civil society representatives along with front line workers and academics from the pandemic experience together, to carefully listen, contextualise, and critically situate ourselves. During the twelve Open Studios with 255 participants, we invited everyone involved to first co-witness the diversity of suffering that resulted from the pandemic, alongside the better stories of responding to and transforming experiences of inequality, and then to engage in the co-creation of even better stories of civic and policy response. This co-creative process resulted in a long list of action ideas,

which were developed into eleven pilot actions and twenty-one policy recommendations by the RESISTIRÉ collective (see Chapters 2 and 4).

> For the co-witness, the challenge is to be able to make ourselves vulnerable to what Susan Sontag (2001) has called 'the pain of others', whether our ancestors or more distant subjects or populations, in the past or present, without appropriating their experiences as our own, and without promoting our own, or our own group's, suffering as extreme or exclusive. (Hirsch, 2019, p. 173)

In the Open Studio workshops, 'personas' were used to enable space for respectful and empathic co-witnessing of different forms of inequality and suffering, inviting participants to listen queerly to 'the pain of others' and to make connection between different sources of pain and suffering. Although the personas were fictional, they were based on the near 900 narrative interviews with those made particularly vulnerable during the pandemic from across Europe. This was, at times, a challenging experience. For some, it was emotionally challenging to co-witness layers of structural inequality playing themselves out in individual lives and stories, sometimes resonating with one's own experience. As Hirsch (2019, p. 173) reminds us, co-witnessing comes with the challenge of making ourselves vulnerable to 'the pain of others' (Sontag, 2001).

For other participants of the Open Studios, our privileged position of co-witnesses raised ethical issues: Who are we to discuss the vulnerabilities of others and to imagine 'solutions' for their challenges? Some of the deepest reflections in Open Studios came from such questions, some of which were translated into critical framing of pilot actions and policy recommendations. For instance, the RESISTIRÉ factsheet on transformative funding (Altınay et al., 2023a) was based on a feminist+ critique of the existing funding schemes and an invitation to critically explore questions of positionality and privilege. In other words, the Open Studios created an open space to critically engage the question of how to imagine better stories of co-witnessing pain and suffering towards more inclusive and more ethical possibilities of co-creation.

The concept of 'the better story' played a key role in the Open Studios to turn co-witnessing into co-creation (Denis & Strid, 2024; see Chapter 4). It was first introduced during the initial introduction and check-in. The participants were asked to share their own personal and collective better stories of responding to and surviving the pandemic. This was an invitation to witness and share our personal resources and agency, as well as the potentials of collective action and solidarity. In other words, before delving into the 'pain of others', we invited ourselves to engage with our own pain and suffering, with a focus on what was helping us survive – and, in some cases, transform and heal.

A crucial part of the Open Studio experience was the close exploration (first in small groups and later in the plenary) of the existing better stories of civil society and policy responses to the pandemic from across Europe (covering a wide range of communities made vulnerable during the pandemic). The energy of the group often became more vibrant during those discussions and many participants expressed, particularly in the final reflections, that reading and discussing the better stories of collective action inspired and energised them. The better stories of collective action, resistance and solidarity shared and discussed in the Open Studios acted as invitations to witness and practice 'active hope' (Macy & Johnstone 2022, p. 3).

In our podcast interview (Altınay & Georgis, 2022), Dina Georgis, while asking us to become 'ethical witnesses of the radical desire for change', emphasised the significance of play and creativity for social transformation and invited us to create spaces for radical subjectivity to come through and be nourished. The Open Studio, with its use of 'the better story' as a key methodology and its invitation to co-design imaginative alternatives for greater equality became that space, resulting in the co-creation of twenty-one policy recommendations and eleven (implemented) pilot actions.

An essential part of the 'better story' methodology of the Open Studio was keeping the question 'who is missing here?' alive and fresh in each session. This question, reflecting our intersectional feminist+ lens, kept us alert about the layers of inequality that may not have found expression, either in the materials prepared for the Open Studio or in the co-created action ideas. This brings us to our third main question.

Feminist+ witnessing and solidarity

How can a feminist+ lens help us explore, make visible and co-create better stories of egalitarian and inclusive policies, initiatives and practices? This was a question that constituted a connecting thread throughout RESISTIRÉ. When we asked the question 'who is missing?', we remained particularly attuned to gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, race and citizenship status being represented in our analysis and gatherings, and that feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations were present as research participants and co-creative partners.

While the field of crisis research tends to be criticised for its disciplinary fragmentation, lack of integrative frameworks, lack of a shared terminology and theory, and its reliance on small-N (often regarded as 'inconsistent') qualitative sources (Buchanan & Denyer, 2012), RESISTIRÉ has approached precisely such multiplicity as a strength, drawing on and advocating theoretical diversity,

methodological pluralism, and inclusive solidarity. Small-N, often regarded as 'unreliable sources' in mainstream (crisis) research, are in fact the marginalised, minoritised, and subjugated voices, which have constituted the main sources of learning, theorising and inspiration for RESISTIRÉ. While listening and drawing on multiple theoretical frameworks, we found many narratives of agency and better stories, including a stronger sense of community – as a result of the pandemic – and stories of solidarity. These better stories provide a counter narrative to (pandemic) stories of resignation and passivity, and can be seen as starting points for the formulation of collective political claims, as well as for practising political forms of agency towards the co-creation of collective counter-narratives (Lister, 2021). By 'listening queerly' (Georgis, 2013) to the 'subjugated' standpoints of those who were made the most vulnerable during the pandemic, as well as to collective actions based on those standpoints, we sought to develop a 'feminist theory of situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1991) that could help us better understand the multiplicity of the pandemic experience, as well as the imaginative responses to its unequal unravelling.

Indeed, one of the striking findings of RESISTIRÉ has been that feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations – particularly those that adopt an intersectional perspective and work with diverse communities at the grassroots level – were the ones that developed the more inclusive, effective and transformative responses to the pandemic as a crisis. Based on our learning from the field and feminist scholar Cynthia Cockburn's (2004) formulation of 'violence as a continuum', we developed a RESISTIRÉ factsheet that theorised 'crisis as a continuum' (Altınay et al., 2023b, p. 4):

> RESISTIRÉ research suggests that crisis is best approached as a continuum, so there is a need to prepare before the crisis (e.g., through inclusive crisis management plans and preventive measures), to respond effectively during the peak of the crisis, and to attend to the afterlife of the crisis (e.g., through inclusive recovery plans and monitoring systems).

Our main finding was that feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations had played a key role addressing the pandemic crisis as a continuum and mitigating its gendered impacts (Altınay et al., 2023b, p. 5):

> RESISTIRÉ's findings on better stories of crisis response particularly highlight the accumulated experience, wisdom, and practices of inclusive feminist politics with regards to crisis preparation, management, response, and recovery processes. Feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations, especially those that adopt an intersectional perspective, have played a key role in mitigating the gendered impacts of the pandemic crisis, as well as of the recent earthquake disaster in Turkey, for the most vulnerable communities.

Another striking case of finding particular inspiration and learning in the experiences of feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations was related to our inquiry into funding schemes – of both research organisations and funders that supported civil society organisations. As we analysed our findings on the potentials and shortcomings of the existing funding ecosystem, the main inspirations for alternatives came from the feminist funding field (Altınay et al. 2023b). Citing FemFund Poland as the better story of transformative funding, and drawing inspiration from the astute analysis of its co-founder Magda Pochec (Altınay et al., 2023b, p. 9f), our summary recommendation was as follows (p. 1):

> The RESISTIRÉ research has demonstrated that civil society organisations (CSOs) played an essential role in responding to and managing the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis, particularly in terms of addressing the needs of the most vulnerable groups and mitigating intersectional and gendered inequalities. Yet the lack of secure, flexible, and sustainable funding interrupted and, in some cases, hampered these vital efforts. As Europe and the world face multiple and intersecting crises (health, war, energy, food security, environmental degradation, drought, fires, earthquakes, gender-based violence), it has become all the more imperative to design funding schemes that support CSO resilience and enable rapid and effective civic response to crises. This requires a shift in funding schemes towards participatory, transformative, flexible, long-term, capacity-building funding.

A third example of co-learning with feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations was our productive collaboration with SPoD, an LGBTQI+ organisation in Istanbul that already had extensive experience in inclusive qualitative and quantitative research. Our RAS analysis suggesting that most surveys during the pandemic lacked an LGBTQI+ inclusive approach and language (Stovell et al., 2022; see Chapter 6), we organised a series of conversations and knowledge-exchange with SPoD[2] which culminated in the writing, by Oğulcan Yediveren, of the *Inclusion Handbook for Researchers Using Survey Methodology*, published simultaneously in English and Turkish (Yediveren, 2023a, 2023b). Offering a wide range of methodological tools and strategies for survey researchers to be more inclusive, this Handbook acts as a valuable reminder of the possibilities of fruitful collaboration and co-learning with grassroots organisations and researchers outside of the academic establishment.

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2   RESISTIRÉ researchers from Oxford Brookes University (Audrey Harroche, Cal Horton, Charoula Tzanakou) and Sabancı University (Ayşe Gül Altınay, Nazlı Türker, Pınar Ensari) participated in a series of online conversations and written exchanges with SPoD researcher Oğulcan Yediveren between September 2022 and April 2023.

All three examples discussed here, which are by no means comprehensive of the multiple cases of co-learning and collaboration with feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations throughout RESISTIRÉ, resulted in a collective dissemination and networking activity in the last month of the project. In September 2023, a hybrid conference was organised in Istanbul, 'Better Stories of Creative Crisis Response', that brought together feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations and funders to discuss the two factsheets Crisis as a Continuum (Altınay et al., 2023b) and Transformative Funding (Altınay et al., 2023a), and to present the SpoD Handbook, along with RESISTIRÉ's own book of narratives, *(Better) Stories from the Pandemic* (Aglietti et al., 2023). Other RESISTIRÉ events, including the workshops, Open Studios and the final conference in Brussels, also hosted a wide spectrum of feminist+ organisations from across Europe, creating a space of co-learning, collaboration and co-creation for diverse groups of participants, as well as making their impactful and inspiring work visible at the European level.

While the RESISTIRÉ project was equipped to create such spaces of collaboration thanks to its dynamic design, which included three cycles of research, co-creation and action, even a better (project) story would have been the inclusion of grassroots communities and organisations (especially those made more vulnerable during the pandemic) at the level of conception (see Medeiros, 2017).

To what extent has RESISTIRÉ been a better story of (consortium) research? We will conclude this Epilogue with some reflections on this question.

RESISTIRÉ: A better story of (consortium) research?

We can always do better than our better story
Dina Georgis

In RESISTIRÉ, it was not only that we were after the better stories of our research participants, but also after *our* better story of (consortium) research. What would be a better story of responding to the pandemic – research-wise and action-wise? This was a question that was kept alive during the two-and-a-half years of RESISTIRÉ research. How to embody and enact a better story of collaborative and co-creative research remained a collective intention and exploration throughout.

Essential to the possibility of integrating this intention and exploration was the dynamic three-cycle research design of RESISTIRÉ, which included brief pauses in between the cycles (despite time pressures) to critically reflect on our learnings from the previous cycle and explore the possibility of building on those learnings in the next ones. The role of Alain Denis in the conception and implementation of this dynamic, co-creative design process was of critical

significance. Transparency, open discussion, and previously tested co-creative participatory methods played a key role in creating a culture of honest exchange and collaboration in search of a better story of consortium research. Yet, this invitation would not have materialised into an inspiring and empowering process of participatory research without European Science Foundation's flexible and engaged project management, the openness of all work package leaders to share their design, creation and implementation processes with all RESISTIRÉ partners, and the enthusiastic participation of all RESISTIRÉ researchers in all aspects of the project.

Working through a great diversity of contexts, disciplinary backgrounds, institutional settings and positionalities (as well as vulnerabilities), care responsibilities and time constraints brings with itself the potential for conflict, unease and asymmetry (between effort and recognition). Not claiming to be a 'best practice' and certainly not claiming to represent the views and experiences of all project participants, as the co-authors of this Epilogue, we would like to highlight some of the collective efforts to address these challenges towards making RESISTIRÉ a better story of consortium research.

If we were to highlight one critical structural factor that supported our search for a better story of collaboration, that would be transparency and open participation in all decision-making and (co)creation processes. To start with, the monthly Management Board meetings – from the creation of the agenda to the decision-making process – were open to everyone's participation and contribution regardless of one's role in their institution or in the consortium. The decisions in the Management Board and other meetings were often taken by consensus, with the integration of critique and concerns raised by different project participants in the final decision. When a consensus was not reached in the meeting, follow-up meetings would be held to address the concerns raised, typically leading to wiser decisions which could then be implemented more swiftly with collective commitment and participation.

Beyond the Management Board meetings, where most critical decisions were taken collectively, participation was encouraged in all research and action processes. Through open calls for participation and the transparent sharing of meeting schedules and agendas via collective emails and the active use of SharePoint as a shared interface, all partners were invited – and indeed encouraged – to take part in workshops, Open Studios, cross-cutting meetings between work packages, as well as internal conferences for sharing research insights and decision-making on the upcoming cycles. We must acknowledge the role of the pandemic both as an impediment (with increasing care responsibilities and health challenges for some partners) and as an enabler of more inclusive

participation. With most meetings being held online and physical constraints, including budgets, not being an issue, more participants across the RESISTIRÉ consortium were able to take part in participatory decision-making and co-creative processes. Transparency and open participation also shaped the writing of reports and other RESISTIRÉ outputs, where everyone was invited to contribute through the SharePoint or Miro interfaces (as all works-in progress were open for comments and critique to all partners and participants).

Transparency and participation would not be enough to ensure a better story of collaborative research without explicit efforts and action to recognise everyone's effort, labour and wisdom. Throughout the project, and more significantly in the dissemination face, early career researchers in the consortium were given priority, when possible and appropriate based on effort, as lead authors on deliverables and as speakers and facilitators in webinars, workshops and conferences. During the final conference in Brussels, there were more early career researchers as speakers than senior partners, which was the result of an explicit decision and effort on the part of the organising committee. These efforts were complemented with voluntary paper-writing workshops where researchers with more advanced experience shared knowledge and strategies for academic writing and publishing, and all participants were encouraged to collaborate on writing projects. And it was indeed during one of these collaborative paper workshops, mixing early and established career researchers, that the very idea of this very edited volume was born and started to take form. Everyone in the RESISTIRÉ consortium was invited to contribute and encouraged to write collaboratively.

Another quality that contributed to the process of making RESISTIRÉ a better story of collaborative research was the openness of the project as a whole and all partners for self-critique and self-reflection. Enabled by the three-cycle research design, the project included different phases of critique and reflection, open to the contributions of all and facilitated by participatory design techniques, which strengthened the dynamic process of co-creation and learning from challenges and failures. The final example of this effort was the organisation of what we have called a Meta Open Studio in Istanbul, where we used some of the Open Studio co-design and co-creation techniques to critically reflect on the Open Studio methodology, so that it can be developed further and implemented better in other research projects. In other words, the project concluded with a workshop on the exploration of the better story of Open Studios.

Finally, we would like to mention some of the key values that shaped the RESISTIRÉ journey: Humility, compassion, care and solidarity. Stuck in our living spaces, facing the unknown process of the pandemic, we were able to cultivate a culture of humility, compassion, care and solidarity. Co-witnessing

each other's challenges without judgment or an effort to fix, we maintained and encouraged relationships based on compassion and solidarity. Some worked better than others, certain times and moments were more challenging than others, but the overall experience of our collaboration was shaped by a genuine effort to walk our talk and embody collective care. At times, this effort translated into experimenting with unlikely practices of embodied care, for instance integrating qigong into our Open Studios and other long meetings.[3]

All these collective efforts culminated in the co-creation of a spirit of solidarity and commitment beyond project requirements. Including our reviewers and Open Studio participants, many observers have recognised RESISTIRÉ as an a-typical consortium project, both in terms of its process and project outputs.

In terms of its process, RESISTIRÉ was quite unique, in our experience, as a project where the 'road was made by walking' at every step of the way – and done so collectively, with a spirit of solidarity, care and co-creation.

Let us end with an inspiring example of making the road by walking and 'walking our talk': The *(Better) Stories from the Pandemic*, edited with great care, diligence and creativity by Claudia Aglietti, Catriona Delaney, Pinar Ensari, Elena Ghidoni, Audrey Harroche, Alexis Still and Nazli Türker, came out of a dinner conversation in Strasbourg that started with the question 'How can we give back to the people who have so generously shared their life stories with us?'. Asked and debated passionately first by María López Belloso, Ayşe Gül Altınay, Sofia Strid and Marina Cacace, and later by all consortium partners, this question shaped *(Better) Stories from the Pandemic,* which was made possible through impressive collaboration and hard work in a matter of months, bringing together the different resources of the different partners: Sofia Strid contacting Örebro University Press and securing funding for its production; Marina Cacace and Claudia Aglietti from Knowledge and Innovation working with the network of national researchers to gather a pool of relevant narratives; Ayşe Gül Altınay, Nazlı Türker and Pınar Ensari from Sabancı University working creatively with feminist designers and illustrators, Özge Özgüner and Aslı Alpar, in the beautiful design of the book; Sofia Strid, Marina Cacace, María López Belloso, Charikleia Tzanakou and Ayşe Gül Altınay providing editorial support, and the co-editors working impressively across busy schedules and different time zones to select the narratives and create a flow between the harsh realities of

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3 Having certified qigong instructors among us (Ayşe Gül Altınay and Nazlı Türker) enabled this integration. Otherwise, we would have explored other possibilities of integrating embodied collective care into our long hours on Zoom.

inequality experienced in the pandemic and better stories of transformation and (personal and collective) healing (Aglietti et al., 2023)[4]. Not being one of the originally planned research outputs, this book of narratives became one of our better stories of responding to Dina Georgis' (Altınay & Georgis, 2022) call to be 'ethical witnesses of the radical desire for change'. RESISTIRÉ itself was built on such desire and on a concerted commitment and effort to make a difference through research. At least for the co-authors of this Epilogue, RESISTIRÉ stands as a better story of 'walking our talk' as feminist+ scholars of social change and inequality and of turning (consortium) research into a transformative journey of co-creation and solidarity.

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We are grateful to all of our partners for the myriad ways in which they have embodied the better story of collaborative research, and particularly to Alain Denis for recognising the significance of the concept of 'the better story' early on

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4   Another better story of research was the translation of the book and five factsheets into Turkish by the Sabancı University team (with the support of Begüm Selici). This complex process was supported by all partners, particularly by Grace Romeo from Yellow Window and Claire Braun from ESF who voluntarily gave support for the design of the factsheets, Sofia Strid who secured Örebro University Press support for the Turkish publication of the book and Adam Brandstetter-Kunc who smoothly coordinated this complex process and provided timely uploads on Zenodo. In other words, it took 'a village' to enable this complex translation process, but we believe that it was well worth the effort. As of February 2024, the book has been downloaded more than 500 times in each language, in addition to the more than 100 print copies distributed during our final events and beyond to our stakeholders.

and helping us integrate it into all phases of the project, particularly the Open Studios.

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Index