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TRADE UNIONS FOR A FAIR RECOVERY

**Covid-19 Impact on the Employment Conditions of Women,
Youth, People with Disabilities, and Atypical Workers**



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The challenges brought about by Covid-19 led many countries to adopt broadly similar strategies and approaches to manage the initial months of the pandemic. At the same time, research on the pandemic exposed profound power, economic, and health disparities among different social groups. While the initial effects of the pandemic on the Maltese labour market were substantial, two years after the pandemic started, both employment and unemployment rates were back to pre-pandemic levels.
- International research indicates widespread effects of the pandemic on working conditions. Working from home (WFH) became more common, and the experiences of essential workers were highlighted. Women, youth, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and atypical workers are four social groups that tend to experience greater challenges in their working lives when compared to others. International research indicates that these groups may disproportionately bear the brunt of the pandemic.
- The study seeks to better understand how the work-related experiences and attitudes of women, youth, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and atypical workers developed during the pandemic. Empirical data was gathered through three different methods, namely focus groups (11 participants), a survey (340 participants) and in-depth interviews (15 participants) between April and September 2022.
- Many of the Covid-19 work-related experiences of participants were shared across demographics and other life circumstances. Irrespective of their circumstances, during the initial stages of the pandemic, workers seemed to have been united by a ubiquitous sense of fear, which over a prolonged period of time led to exhaustion, and an increasing drive to return to ‘normality’.
- The pandemic did not exert catastrophic effects on the employment situation of the participants, and tended not to have long-term effects on their careers, though some lost career opportunities were reported. Within two years from the start of the pandemic, the large majority of the surveyed workers were experiencing pre-pandemic levels of working hours (80.5%) and salary (82.4%), though many respondents felt that their workload grew during the pandemic (39.3%). The working conditions in specific sectors, such as healthcare and manufacturing remained more affected than others. Work backlog was one of the mentioned side-effects of the pandemic.
- The greater use of ICT led to significant difficulties in disconnecting from work. Qualitative data indicated that the greater use of ICT may have impinged on organisational communication in terms of both quantity and quality. Those who worked from home generally reported having the necessary assistance, knowledge, skills, environment and resources to work effectively. Most of the respondents who worked at least partly from home felt more productive at home than at the office (74%). But challenges stemming from WFH were highlighted, such as apathy, privacy, noise and other environmental difficulties, feelings of not being trusted, discrimination, and abuse of the system. Most respondents who worked at least partly from home since the pandemic started, stated that if given the opportunity, they would like blended work (61.8%).

- Two years into the pandemic, the survey respondents' feeling of work satisfaction, enthusiasm and job security were at pre-pandemic levels or higher (77.9%, 72.9%, and 86.8% respectively). But about half (48.2%) of the respondents felt more stressed at work. Stress was correlated to greater working hours and workload, while being inversely correlated to job security. Stress was also related to a change in work schedule and a change in the tasks carried out at work. Despite the relatively high stress levels, very few workers thought about leaving their job due to the pandemic (4.5%).
- Two years into the pandemic, most respondents thought that colleagues supported them (78.8%). The majority of survey respondents were also satisfied with the support received from their superiors since the start of the pandemic (66.3%). At the same time, most survey respondents stated that dealing with clients became more stressful in the pandemic (60.8%). Positive work relations were generally correlated to job satisfaction and job enthusiasm, while negatively related to work stress.
- The workers' OHS attitudes in relation to the pandemic evolved considerably during the course of its first two years. In 2022, most survey respondents still believed to be at risk of getting Covid-19 at work (51.7%), and still felt little control over whether they got infected at work (55.7%). Their fear appears to have declined considerably, though there was a persistent concern (by 81.8% of the sample) of infecting their loved ones through work exposure. Most respondents stated that they had enough training (54.9%), equipment and procedures (65.5%) to protect themselves against Covid-19. The majority of respondents believed that their managers cared about their well-being (58.4%) and that management communicates properly on issues relating to Covid-19 (58.6%). The pandemic appears to have increased the friction between Maltese and foreign workers, especially third country nationals (TNCs), who were at times accused of not only carrying greater risk of infection, but also of not caring about Covid-19 safety measures.
- Nearly 40% of respondents felt that their level of happiness and/or mental health got worse since the pandemic started. Over a third (35.3%) stated that their physical health got worse since the pandemic started. While the large majority of survey respondents affirmed to be earning similar salaries to pre-pandemic, over a fourth (27.2%) acknowledged that their family finances got worse during this period. Survey respondents generally stated that their family relations stayed similar pre-pandemic levels (71.8%), but a quarter of the respondents (27.5%) felt that their relations with friends got worse.
- Female participants were significantly less likely than men to report lowered levels of job security during the pandemic. Motherhood seemed to affect the work experiences and attitudes of the female participants. Mothers were less likely than other participants to consider leaving their job due to the pandemic, to change the time when they work during the pandemic, and to believe that the pandemic had long-term effects on their career. Since the pandemic started, women (especially mothers) were more likely to work from home when compared to men. Women also tended to feel more productive than men when WFH.
- Young persons were less satisfied with the working conditions in their job when compared to older workers, and nearly a third of them changed job since the pandemic started, though often for reasons unrelated to the pandemic. Young workers were more likely to have experienced decreased working hours and changes in their work schedule and work tasks. Important themes among young participants included work-related difficulties due

to low levels of experience, the need or otherwise of supervision, difficulties regarding organisational communication, loneliness and the need to keep contact with colleagues. Despite the greater turbulence that the pandemic created in their working lives, young persons were more likely than older ones to believe that the pandemic had positive long-term effects on their career.

- The participating PWD experienced increased work stress levels during the pandemic. For instance, they felt that dealing with work clients became more stressful. Most of the surveyed PWD thought that they did not receive adequate pandemic-related health and safety training. Several of the surveyed participating PWD did not feel enough support by their work colleagues. Besides, they experienced decreased physical health. Half of the surveyed PWD believed that the pandemic had negative effects on their career, but none of them thought about leaving their job due to the pandemic.
- Atypical workers appear to have been advantaged with regards to some pandemic-related health and safety measures at work. They were more likely to state that they had enough equipment and procedures to protect themselves. They were also more likely to feel that their management communicated properly on issues relating to Covid-19. Atypical workers were less likely to have worked from home since the pandemic started. Besides, those who worked from home were less likely to state that they had the necessary knowledge and skills to work effectively. On the other hand, atypical workers' job stability might have been affected more by the pandemic when compared to other workers, as they were more likely to have changed their job due to the pandemic.
- The following recommendations may assist trade unions better target their interventions, thereby increasing their relevance and impact on collective bargaining and social dialogue: improve organisational communication; facilitate working from home (WFH); support workers' mental and physical wellbeing; facilitate relations between Maltese and migrant workers; better manage workloads; cater for the long-term career needs of women, mothers, youth, PWD and atypical workers; strengthen efforts to unionise PWD and atypical workers.

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 shook humanity thoroughly and in a unique manner. The virus rapidly left a deep impact on human civilisation across the globe unlike anything in living memory, affecting countries irrespective of their political, socio-economic, or other circumstances.

Many studies have examined the varied and complex effects of the pandemic, since Covid-19 was first discovered at the end of 2019 in China. Part of the research focused on the impact on employment and the lives of workers. Important common themes emerged across countries such as “pandemic preparedness, public health interventions, lockdowns, economic support... and vaccinations” (Kistnasamy, 2022). The experience of similar challenges led many countries to adopt broadly similar strategies and approaches to manage the initial months of the crisis. In particular, there were widespread lockdowns or other social and employment restrictions, leading to a slowdown of the world economy, the disruption of industries, the breaking down of supply chains, and employment loss or increased precarity.

At the same time, research on the pandemic exposed profound power (political), economic, and health disparities among different social groups (e.g. Gwynn, 2021; Olayo-Méndez, 2021). The work situation of different social groups is based on systematic inequalities such as the employment sectors in which they work, and their access to housing, transportation, healthcare, and social safety-nets (Olayo-Méndez, 2021). Thus, while the threat posed by Covid-19 has impacted everyone, not everyone ended up in the same proverbial boat, as the ultimate impact of the pandemic on individuals greatly depended on their country’s economy, the social structure in which they lived and the social privilege they held.

This study focuses on the effects of Covid-19 on the organisation and conditions of work of different social groups in Malta, in particular women, youth, person with disabilities (PWDs), and a-typical workers. Rather than just examining the experiences of the initial stages of the pandemic, the study seeks to understand better how such experiences developed and how people adjusted over the first two and a half years. By shedding light on the evolving work experiences and attitudes of different social groups, this study aims to assist trade unions in focusing their efforts and increasing their relevance and impact on collective bargaining and social dialogue.

The issue of vulnerability is a key thread underpinning this study as it acts as a common denominator to a variety of impacts that the pandemic had on many groups of people in Malta. It should also be stressed that individuals’ level of vulnerability may increase due to the interaction of different demographic characteristics (such as age, gender, disabilities, race and so on), a phenomenon known as ‘intersectionality’. Thus different social groups might experience varying levels of vulnerability, even when they might share the same type of job (e.g. Llop-Girones et al., 2021).

This document consists of six chapters, comprising of a brief review of literature, a methodology, a chapter illustrating the quantitative results, an analysis and discussion chapter of all empirical research, and a conclusion. The literature review briefly discusses the context of this research and some relevant findings on the main themes of interest. The methodology describes how focus groups, a survey and interviews were carried out to collect empirical data between April and September 2022. The results chapter examines data through descriptive and inferential statistics, with the assistance of relevant tables. The analysis and discussion chapter investigates and interprets the main quantitative and qualitative findings in

the Maltese context. The concluding chapter includes recommendations to trade unions on how to manage the changes brought about by Covid-19.

CHAPTER 2 - BRIEF REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 The Maltese context

The initial effects of the pandemic on the Maltese labour market were substantial. It quickly affected the majority of workers in Malta. Many workers experienced a reduction in their working hours while others were temporarily not working, especially during the lockdowns (National Statistics Office, NSO, 2020c; 2021). However, employment among males only decreased by 0.6 percentage points in 2020 when compared to 2019, whereas the share of employed females increased by 1.4 percentage points over the same period (NSO, 2021).

The pandemic brought about changes in the organisation of work in most economic sectors. Analysing EU data, Fana et al. (2020) concluded that the employment impact of Covid-19 was asymmetric not only between countries (where countries with already high unemployment rates and precarious employment were more strongly affected), but also within the same countries. Indeed, the changes experienced by Maltese businesses since 2020 varied a lot depending on the sector of employment. Sectors involving human contact, such as hospitality and travel were the most affected ones, and some of them such as aviation continued experiencing great difficulties two years into the pandemic. Total inbound tourists in 2020 decreased by three fourths when compared to 2019 (NSO, 2021). In January 2022, inbound tourism only amounted to 40% of the same month in 2020 (NSO, 2020a; 2022a).

Government assistance such as the Covid Wage Supplement scheme¹ helped to keep tens of thousands of workers in employment. Sectors offering essential services kept operating, though often with greater difficulties. Operators in different economic sectors who were able to operate online fared relatively well. Businesses that already had the necessary digital infrastructure, such as gaming, IT Services and banking and finance found it easier to cope with the disruption. During the last half of March 2020, over a third of workers in Malta were working remotely from home (NSO, 2020c). The more successful companies were those that managed to adapt quickly and comprehensively. Adaptation often involved the reorganisation of work, impacting the working conditions of employees. The government used considerable funds to help companies during this turbulent period.

The labour market appears to have weathered the storm. By the first quarter of 2022, Malta's employment rate was 76.1% and the unemployment rate was 3.2%, better than the same period in 2020 when the employment rate stood at 74.6% and unemployment rate at 3.3% (NSO, 2020b; 2022b). However, such positive trends do not shed light on the repercussions of the pandemic on workers lives, the topic that will be investigated in the next section.

2.2 Some international findings on the effects of the pandemic on workers

Early on in the pandemic, Reich (2020) noted that Covid-19 strengthened social divide and facilitated the emergence of new classes of workers in the USA, including those who work remotely from home and those who do essential work. The following sections briefly investigate some of the work-related effects of the pandemic on these two categories of workers.

¹ The Covid Wage Supplement scheme provided workers with a basic wage cover to address the disruption caused by the pandemic and avoid redundancies.

2.2.1 Working from home (WFH)

The pandemic boosted WFH across the world. While Malta's utilisation of teleworking is low in comparison to the EU, it still increased substantially during the pandemic (Central Bank of Malta, CBM, 2021). Research on WFR during the pandemic often centred around two themes, namely health and productivity, yielding complex results.

Some research highlighted productivity losses when WFH. Examining the subjective productivity of workers in the manufacturing sector in Japan, Kitagawa et al. (2021) found that WFH resulted in a reduction in productivity especially due to poor setups and communication difficulties. Morikawa (2022) found that WFH resulted in only 60%–70% of the productivity levels at the workplace. The situation was worse among employees and firms that started WFH in the pandemic. On the other hand, WFH productivity decreased less among the highly educated and high-wage employees (Morikawa, 2022). Also in relation to higher level jobs, a study carried out in Turkey among management-level hotel employees by Chi et al. (2021) found a relation between WFH during the pandemic and higher level of vigour. The authors believe that the workers' motivation may have been improved by the autonomy given during the pandemic. On the topic of leadership, Stoker et al. (2022) concluded that the inability of managers to adapt their leadership behaviours during the pandemic hampered the effectiveness of WFH.

In an online survey among 988 participants in the USA, Awada et al. (2021) found that in general, workers WFH did not perceive changes in their productivity when compared to in-office productivity pre-pandemic. Women, older, and high-income workers tended to report greater productivity. Mental and physical health positively influenced productivity, as well as having older children, increased communication with co-workers and having a dedicated room for work at home. Individuals who had school age children were among those who reported longer working hours. In another study among 334 respondents who were experienced in WFH in Malta, Briguglio (2021) reported positive findings on quality of work they did, the amount of work they did per hour, time management, relationships with family members and physical comfort. On the other hand, barriers to WFH included the negative effect on work relationships, concerns about the way meetings were held, the physical environment at home, and the less positive attitudes of higher level managers on WFH. Qualitative research among senior executives and business owners as part of the same study more or less echoed the quantitative findings among workers. Senior executives and business owners believed that WFH led to “higher productivity and focus, greater flexibility, less time wasting, better wellbeing, lower office costs and lower risk of Covid-19 transmission” (Briguglio, 2021, p.8). On the other hand, they pointed to the following disadvantages of WFH: “decreased internal communications and human contact, loss of team dynamics, lack of control and lack of the necessary facilities when working away from the business”. These Maltese findings are generally in line with a larger study carried out among 5,748 knowledge workers across 29 European countries (Ipsen et al., 2021) which reported the following main advantages of WFH: work–life balance; improved work efficiency; and greater work control. The main disadvantages reported in this European study were: home office constraints; work uncertainties; and inadequate tools.

Some research indicates that WFH may be related to lowered wellbeing. Examining longitudinal data in France, Italy, Germany, Spain and Sweden, covering the period May–November 2020, Schifano et al. (2021) concluded that well-being among workers is lower for those WFH. This is especially so among the older, the better-educated, parent with young

children and those who live in more crowded housing. Chi et al. (2021) also found that WFH magnifies the effects of immersion in the job on burnout. Pennington et al. (2022) reported links between greater use of work-related video chat and text messaging when WFH and greater stress levels. This link is particularly strong among mothers with multiple children. A study carried out in Austria revealed that while “the probability of men taking on a larger share of housework increases if men are WFH alone or together with their female partner”, their involvement in childcare increased only when their female partner was unable to work from home (Derndorfer et al., 2021, p.1). In contrast to the above, a survey among 2,301 US workers revealed that persons who started WFH during the pandemic did not differ in any measures of mental health from those whose employment remained the same (McDowell et al., 2021). Other research indicated better mental health among those WFH. For example, investigating workers in the manufacturing sector in Japan, Kitagawa et al. (2021) concluded that the mental health of workers who work from home is better than that of workers who are unable to do so. Another study carried out in Malta indicated that WFH during the pandemic was positively associated with family relationships and physical comfort among others (Briguglio et al., 2021). On their part, Hallman et al. (2021) revealed that days on which workers worked from home in Sweden were associated with longer duration of sleep than days working from the office, a behaviour change potentially beneficial to health.

2.2.2 Essential workers

During the pandemic, considerable research focused on essential workers, especially those working in health care services. Studies clearly show that the pandemic put health workers at significant physical and psychological risk (e.g. Firew et al., 2020; Llop-Girones et al., 2021).

The pandemic definitely increased the challenges to the occupational health and safety (OHS) of essential workers, who experienced higher risks of infections (Faria de Moura Villela et al., 2021). Shortage of protective resources were widely reported by health care staff in different countries (e.g. O’Neal et al., 2021). For example, a National E-survey among health care workers (HCW) in Italy carried out in March 2020 found that only 22% of such workers considered to have adequate supplies and quality of personal protective equipment (Felice et al., 2020). One assumes that in many countries, the situation improved as the supply of such equipment was ramped up to meet the demand. On the topic of physical risks, survey research carried out in Israel indicated that during the pandemic, 37% of couriers reported musculoskeletal pains at least once a day (Egozi et al., 2022)

Essential workers, especially HCW often feared for their own health and that of their loved ones (Honarmand et al., 2022; Prasad et al., 2021; O’Neal et al., 2021; Toh et al., 2021). Negative mood, anxiety, PTSD, depression, loneliness and stress were commonly reported among essential workers across the globe (Faria de Moura Villela et al., 2021; Quadri et al., 2021; Mehta et al., 2022; Mansueto et al., 2021). Despite such difficulties, access to psychological support might not have always been available (e.g. Felice et al., 2020). Stress may have been the result of a large combination of challenges, including increased workload and responsibilities (Honarmand et al., 2022; Prasad et al., 2021). Some research has linked stress to accidents during the pandemic (Egozi et al., 2022). There is some evidence that women in essential jobs were more likely to feel PTSD and psychological distress (Mehta et al., 2022). So it makes sense that according to Felice et al. (2020) female HCW were more likely to rate psychological support as useful.

Work outcomes and attitudes sometimes differ across countries. For instance, a survey carried out in New Zealand found that essential workers had less uncertainty about finances and employment during the pandemic when compared to non-essential workers (Bell et al., 2021). On the other hand, according to research carried out in the USA, essential workers suffered from more precarious employment including income loss than non-essential workers (Capasso et al., 2022). There are indications that essential workers outside healthcare might experience worse employment outcomes. For example, Pandey et al., (2021) labelled domestic workers as “expendable essential workers” as their work “remains materially undervalued” despite its importance (p.1287).

Many of the challenges faced by essential workers are shared to different extents with non-essential workers. The following section discusses how the pandemic may have disproportionately impacted specific groups of workers.

2.3 Effects on specific groups of workers

Women, youth, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and atypical workers are four social groups that tend to experience greater challenges in their working lives when compared to others. While the challenges of workers within each of these four groups may vary dramatically, they all tend to face significant difficulties which their peers might not. It is hypothesised that the pandemic may have accentuated such challenges, creating disproportionate adverse effects on them when compared to other workers. The following sections briefly look at some pandemic-related literature on each of the four groups.

2.3.1 Women

Peck (2021) argued that the pandemic exacerbated the challenges that working women already had. Some research points out that women are disproportionately bearing the brunt of the pandemic. The pandemic and initial governments’ strategies to curb the spread of the virus massively affected service sectors such as retail and hospitality, which tend to be female dominated. Odate and Parmar (2021) reported that the pandemic led to greater job losses among women than men in the USA, while others went as far as labelling the recession as a “pink collar recession” (Ribeiro, 2020). In other countries, such as the EU member states, the unemployment rate of men between 2019 and 2020 increased more than that of women (Eurostat, 2022).

Some research also revealed that working women experienced a lowering of their productivity levels, and a concern that this may affect their career development (e.g. Syndio, 2020 in Peck, 2021; Feng & Savani, 2020). As indicated in a qualitative study among female academics in Turkey, even highly qualified and socially-advantaged women may have experienced adverse effects on their work productivity in particular due to gender roles (Parlak et al., 2021). Social behaviours during the pandemic may have pushed towards more traditional gender roles, thus “deepened gender inequalities” (Parlak et al., 2021).

The pandemic may have also had a disproportionate negative impact on the health of women. It has been argued that as women are more likely to work in essential jobs such as health care, the pandemic put them at increased risk of Covid-19 exposure (Johnson, 2022). However, there does not appear to be statistically significant sex differences in the number of Covid-19 infections globally, while men are significantly more likely to experience Covid-related health complications or death (Global Health 50/50 et al., 2022). On the other hand,

when compared to their male counterparts, working women may suffer more from anxiety and stress (e.g. Jacques-Aviñó et al., 2022; Muñoz-Muñoz et al., 2022). While risk of anxiety increases with worsening employment status, it decreases with age among both sexes (Jacques-Aviñó et al., 2022). Women's particular distress might have been brought about by work overload due to the extra demands they faced with the onslaught of the pandemic (Odate & Parmar, 2021). Women took greater family responsibilities. They increased their care duties due to disruptions of schools and formal childcare and day care. As Odate and Parmar (2021) note, the “pandemic served to reassert the unequal division of labor in the household” (p.40).

One should also stress that different groups of women in the labour force experienced varying work and family outcomes. For instance, despite the profound work-related changes they experienced during the pandemic, women workers in the Australian construction industry only perceived modest negative impacts “on their capacity to engage in paid work activities due to caring responsibilities, pay or earnings, job security, and career progression and advancement” (Oo & Lim, 2021, p.34). A qualitative study by Lemos et al. (2021) among Brazilian female workers WFH during the Covid-19 quarantine period, found that the increased work overload they experienced did not lead to greater family conflict. On the contrary, “some interviewees stated that working from home brought them closer to their children and husbands and provided more time for physical and leisure activities” (p.388). This finding attests to the intricate dynamics that may be created when WFH.

Despite the varied circumstances of the huge category of female workers, it appears fair to conclude that “Covid-19 threatens to erode some of the gains women have made in recent decades in terms of participation” (Churchill, 2021, p.783).

2.3.2 Youth

Young persons are an intrinsically more vulnerable section of the workforce, especially due to their lower levels of experience and the challenges associated with the initial steps of building their careers. Lambovska et al. (2021, p.55) argues that “young graduates, looking for their first job after graduation, are among the most vulnerable groups in the labor market”. The 2020 graduates left education with poor chances of landing a job or getting work experience in the short run (ILO-OECD, 2020). Youths with lower levels of education tend to be further disadvantaged. Contracting economies work against young persons who wish to start their careers. A study carried out in Italy indicated that the pandemic resulted in a substantial prolongation of the school-to-work transition duration to permanent employment, especially among men and foreigners (Fiaschi & Tealdi, 2022). Research also supports the “last in hypothesis”, whereby young workers were more likely to lose their jobs during the pandemic than older workers (Hlasny & AlAzzawi, 2022). Overall, the pandemic increased youth unemployment rates within the EU, both in countries where youth unemployment was already high before the pandemic and also in those with previously lower rates (Lambovska et al., 2021).

Research identified groups of young workers who face greater challenges than others. For example, a study on youths in Egypt and Jordan revealed that youths, especially those in informal employment before the pandemic, were more likely to be laid off during the pandemic. Besides, with the easing of the government regimes, young women experienced poorer employment prospects than young men (Hlasny & AlAzzawi, 2022). Research in Australia similarly found that while young workers have been more hardly impacted by the

pandemic than older ones, young women, “especially those women in their 20s, wanting more work and more hours”, were hit worse than their male counterparts (Churchill, 2021, p.783).

Another Australian study carried out among youth working in the hard-hit hospitality industry found that loss of work resulted in outcomes ranging from ‘inconvenience’ to ‘extreme financial hardships’ depending on the degree of family support they had. As expected, the most severe consequences of the negative employment outcomes of the pandemic were felt by socially disadvantaged young workers (Cook et al., 2021). Lindsay and Ahmed (2021) compared school and employment-related barriers during the pandemic on persons in Canada aged 15-29 with and without disability. Their qualitative research revealed common difficulties among young workers, such as: 1) challenges in the transition to WFH (both in terms of costs and technical challenges); 2) increased uncertainty about employment (including under-employment, difficult working conditions, and difficulty finding work); and also missed career development opportunities (in terms of internships, volunteer opportunities etc) which may affect their careers in the longer term (Lindsay & Ahmed, 2021). Young workers with disability experienced extra challenges when compared to their similar-aged peers. These included a greater impact of the pandemic on their mental health due to their increased propensity of social isolation, and other disability-related challenges such as perceived discrimination and health risks.

However, the literature on the effects of the pandemic on young workers is not clear cut. For example, in a quantitative study about the Slovakian population, Svabova and Gabrikova (2021) found that young persons’ employment was less severely affected by the pandemic than that of older persons. Similarly, in a survey among 418 young persons in Malta, when asked about the impact of the pandemic on their jobs, nearly 40% believed to be unaffected, about a third were affected negatively while over a fourth were affected positively (Azzopardi & Caruso, 2022). According to the study, such mixed results could have been influenced by the welcome flexibility that participants experienced through teleworking and the fact that young workers tend to have fewer family responsibilities. It is also interesting to note that about half of the participants stated that Covid-19 lockdowns and other restrictions impacted negatively on their social relations (Azzopardi & Caruso, 2022).

2.3.3 People with disabilities (PWD)

Research shows that the pandemic aggravated many difficulties that persons with disabilities already experienced in their working and daily lives. Before the pandemic, PWD were more likely to be unemployed or underemployed (WHO & World Bank, 2011; Ernst & Young, 2020). When the pandemic struck, employed PWD were disproportionately affected, increasing their levels of insecurity and risk of poverty. Research carried out in the UK found that during lockdown, PWD were “more likely than their peers to be working reduced hours and experience higher levels of financial stress”, also when taking into account pre-lockdown situation (Emerson et al., 2021, p.472). There is also some evidence that PWD experienced greater difficulty to get back to work when restrictions were lifted. Chan et al. (2020, p.470) concluded that “when the supply of workers is higher than the demand for workers, employers will be even more reluctant to hire people with disabilities”. A variety of factors may contribute to the reintegration challenges of persons with disabilities, such as discrimination, stigma, physical accessibility, and insufficient training (see: WHO & World Bank, 2011).

Maltese research found that the challenges faced by PWD included adequate infrastructure and logistics (Camilleri et al., 2021). WFH presented some PWD challenges shared by others, such as inadequate space to work, poor internet communication, or lack of laptops. But PWD were also faced by specific challenges, such as difficulties by the visually impaired persons to use online platforms for online meetings due to lack of readability with screen readers (Camilleri et al., 2021). Persons with visual challenges also experienced heightened difficulties relating to new procedures at work, “such as logging, visor, taking the temperature, liability waiver and... [having] to change office for more appropriate social distancing” (Camilleri et al., 2021, p.31). Being able to drive was listed as a significant work-related challenge by many PWD in Malta during normal times (Ernst & Young, 2020). The pandemic further hindered their access to public transportation (Camilleri et al., 2021).

It has been argued that the pandemic exacerbated difficulties that have always been faced by PWD to access health care services (e.g. Mitra, 2021; Lebrasseur et al., 2021). “The introduction of restrictive measures, which included the immediate stopping of a number of services provided to persons with disability resulted first and foremost in panic” (Camilleri et al., 2021, p.31). “The experience of services during the Covid-19 restrictive measures was one of frustration and fear by persons with disabilities and their families” (Camilleri et al., 2021, p.34).

During the pandemic, PWD had to endure “changes in social and lifestyle habits... and decreased levels of physical activity” (Lebrasseur et al., 2021, p.1). The disruption of routine was particularly harmful to PWD and their families, especially “if the routines were finely crafted over a number of years and involved concessions from work... arrangements with other members of the immediate or extended family and involved professionals” (Camilleri et al., 2021, p.28). The disruption of routines was also particularly tough for persons with autism and their families (Camilleri et al., 2021). PWD often suffer from weaker social networks. The social disruption brought about by the pandemic increased the sense of isolation among PWD (Camilleri et al., 2021). According to Mitra (2021, p.1), the “increase in social isolation and disruptions in social networks and support systems” led to “an unprecedented rise in mental distress, stress, and anxiety among people with disabilities”. According to Maltese research, those with support from their family and their work coped better during the lock down periods (Camilleri et al., 2021). However, results from a Canadian survey indicated that workers with disabilities had less organizational support than those with no disability (Gignac et al., 2021). “Respondents with disabilities also reported significant differences in employment conditions (e.g., more contract work, stress, unmet accommodation needs) than those with no disability” (Gignac et al., 2021, p.1).

2.3.4 Atypical workers

The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2017) defines standard employment as “continuous, full-time, with a direct relationship between employer and employee”, and non-standard-employment as employment with elements that differ from those of standard employment. Atypical work may be viewed as a somewhat narrower subset of non-standard employment. According to Eurofound (2017), atypical contracts are “employment contracts that do not conform to a standard, open-ended and full-time contract. This can encompass many types of contract, including part-time, fixed-term, temporary, casual and seasonal” (par.1). Non standard types of contracts have increased in Europe and in many other countries across the world over the last decades.

Faced by ever growing international competition requiring cost reduction, together with increasingly volatile markets, employers use atypical work in order to increase flexibility to adjust their workforce as required, and reduce costs. Labour market reforms reducing employment protection legislation and the weakening of trade unions may have facilitated the rise of atypical work in some countries (Eurofound, 2016; ILO, 2017). But the demand for atypical work also derives from the supply side. Specific social categories such as women and young persons favour atypical work as it helps them combine work with other responsibilities, such as childcare and education respectively (ILO, 2017).

The pandemic appears to have acted as a catalyst for atypical work (Thomson & Hünefeld, 2021). On one hand, as expected, many atypical workers in the badly affected economic sectors were among the first to lose their job when the pandemic hit, as they were more easily dispensable (e.g. ILO, 2017; Almeida & Santos, 2020). On the other hand, a significant part of the employment growth generated during the recovery period of the pandemic has been characterized by precarious atypical work (e.g. Almeida & Santos, 2020). The pandemic served to strengthen the ‘gig economy’ (e.g. Cherry & Rutschman, 2020; Umar et al., 2021). For example, the lockdowns during the initial stages of the pandemic strengthened the courier sector (Polkowska, 2021). In a large survey carried out by ADP Research Institute among more than 32,000 workers in 17 countries around the world, most respondents stated to be “more interested in contract work since Covid-19, the main reasons being they believe there are new opportunities for them to perform contract work... or because they have learned new skills that they can apply to contract work” (O’Bannon, 2021). But atypical work may be more precarious in nature, linked to low income and less social protection (Eurofound, 2017).

An international survey carried out across six countries (Sweden, Belgium, Spain, Canada, the United States, and Chile) suggests that the pandemic affected negatively non-standard workers, who experienced a deterioration “in work hours, income, and benefits, as well as the self-reported prevalence of suffering from severe to extreme anxiety or depression” (Gunn et al., 2022, p.2). Other research linked temporary employment to increased vulnerability to the impact of the pandemic on psychosocial health (e.g. Muñoz-Muñoz et al., 2022). Research carried out in Germany in the context of the pandemic found that temporary agency work “was related to unfavourable outcomes in terms of job satisfaction, general health status and musculoskeletal complaints” (Thomson & Hünefeld, 2021, p.1). Besides, a study carried out in Japan under conditions of Covid-19 outbreaks linked temporary employment with persistent suicidal ideation (Sasaki et al., 2021). “Gig or platform workers and workers employed through temporary agencies were [among] those who most often had difficulties covering regular expenses” during the pandemic (Gunn et al., 2022, p.14). Temporary agency workers were less likely to be provided with “personal protective equipment, information, training, or other Covid-19 physical protection measures” (Gunn et al., 2022, p.18). Other research in the context of the pandemic also concluded that “atypical workers are often overlooked when it comes to training and development” (Hamouche & Chabani, 2021). In a similar vein, Basso et al. (2020) linked temporary contracts in USA & European countries to unsafe jobs in non-essential occupations. Considering all the potential negative outcomes of atypical work, it is not surprising that the majority of employees on temporary contracts in the EU would prefer a permanent contract (Eurofound, 2016).

There appear to be significant inter-country differences in the working conditions of atypical workers. For example, non-standard workers in EU countries may experience fewer difficulties covering regular expenses than those in American countries (Gunn et al., 2022). Cherry and Rutschman (2020) described some challenges of gig workers in the USA

stemming from their unclear legal status, which led (at least in the initial stages of the pandemic) to difficulties in accessing unemployment benefits and adequate Covid-19 protection. In the same vein, writing about Canada, Cui (2021) argued that “traditional employment insurance and related programs inadequately serve flexible [non-standard] employees” (p.475). On the other hand, research carried out among EU member states found that non-standard workers tended to be included in job retention schemes during the pandemic, though substantial gaps in income protection remained in some countries (Spasova & Regazzoni, 2022).

Migrants may be among the atypical workers who experienced greater difficulties during the pandemic. Having less knowledge of their legal rights and the local language, a narrower social network and a large reliance on others for both work and housing (de Lange et al., 2020) puts them in a particularly precarious situation. Clibborn and Wright (2020) described how “in Australia, many temporary migrants, who were already at risk of marginalisation due to policies restricting their bargaining power and agency... have lost their jobs and have minimal financial support due to their exclusion from public welfare” (p.62). In Malta, third country nationals (TNCs) in temporary jobs appear to have been among the more easily disposable workers during the pandemic, with many being laid off and sent back to their countries of origin (Debono, 2021).

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

This study sought to investigate how the changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic affected the employment conditions of women, youth, people with disabilities (PWD) and atypical workers. Such information should assist trade unions to facilitate their capacity-building for collective bargaining and social dialogue.

Empirical data was gathered through three different methods, namely focus groups, a survey and in-depth interviews. Each method will be described in turn.

3.1 Focus groups

Two focus groups were carried out in order to investigate the main concerns of union members with regards to the effects of the pandemic on their work. The focus groups were meant to generate themes to help develop the survey, and also to assist in the explanation of the survey's findings. Considering the fact that most union members in Malta are Maltese nationals, in order to facilitate interaction, it was decided to hold focus groups in Maltese. Thus, only Maltese speakers participated.

An invitation email was sent to several trade union members. The email explained the purpose of the proposed meeting and asked interested persons to fill in a registration form that requested some demographic information and contacts. 23 persons filled in a registration form that was created on Google Docs. These interested persons were then contacted again to confirm the date and time of the meetings.

A total of 11 persons turned up and participated in the focus groups. These consisted of 9 men and 2 women. The table below provides some basic demographics details of the focus group participants. The participants were divided according to their work schedule, that is, whether they work office hours or shift. The focus groups were held at the GWU headquarters on 12 April between 1pm and 3pm (2 hours). Each of the two researchers moderated a focus group.

Table 1. Demographics of focus group participants

	Gender	Age	Any disability	Work schedule	Role	Sector of employment
F1F	Female	30+	No	Office hours	Educator	Union
F2M	Male	30+	No	Office hours	Officer	Armed Forces
F3F	Female	30+	No	Office hours	Financial Advisor	Banking and Finance
F4M	Male	30+	No	Office hours	Administrative Officer	Government Authority
F5M	Male	30+	No	Office hours	Building Inspector	Government Authority
F6M	Male	30+	No	Shift	Middle Manager	Public Entity
F7M	Male	30+	No	Shift	Health Carer	Health Care
F8M	Male	30+	Yes	Shift	Health Carer	Health Care
F9M	Male	30+	No	Shift	Middle Manager	Public Entity
F10M	Male	30+	No	Shift	Inspector	Public Entity
F11M	Male	30+	No	Office hours	Union official	Union

The procedure adopted in the focus groups followed a standardized format. Participants were greeted and provided with some refreshments and food. They had to sign an attendance sheet. The researchers introduced themselves and the rationale of the project including the focus groups. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality in their responses. Participants were told

that the meeting would be recorded and that such recording would be deleted when the project is completed. They were asked to sign a consent form and were given time to ask questions if required. Then the researchers guided the groups to focus on the following topics that were inspired by a review of literature:

1. Pandemic's effects on job
 - a. Changes in employment status and other aspects of work (salary, load, absenteeism, hours, location, tasks)
 - b. Attitudes and perceptions (job security, productivity, job satisfaction, stress, work engagement)
 - c. Any long-term effects on career
 - d. Concern for pandemic-related personal health and safety at work
2. Pandemic-related support at work
 - a. (Participation in) pandemic planning, clarity of guidelines/protocols
 - b. Support from management and colleagues
 - c. Difficulties related to new ways of working (e.g. teleworking)

Sub-questions about each of the above topics were included, just in case participants required further prompting.

The recordings of the focus groups were analysed in order to derive the main themes and capture some relevant quotes.

3.2 Survey

The purpose of the survey was to capture the effects of the pandemic on a wide section of workers who are members of the GWU. The survey was created in English on Google Forms. It was developed on the basis of a review of literature, taking into consideration the results of the focus groups.

The survey included an accompanying note which informed participants that it formed part of a project co-financed by the European Union. The note briefly described the purpose of the study. Participants were guaranteed strict anonymity. Besides, the note included the contact of one of the researchers in case anyone wished to receive further information about the study.

The survey consisted of 24 items (or groups of items), nearly all of which in multiple choice format. Most of the items focused on the effects of the pandemic on the nature of work, career prospects, work relations, attitudes towards work, and personal life. The survey also enquired about the participants' attitudes towards the pandemic and teleworking. Finally, some questions about the participants' demographics were posed.

The draft survey was piloted among a small group of union members. Subsequently, invitation emails were sent to over 6000 GWU members on Friday 29th April. A total of 340 surveys were completed. The following table illustrates some basic demographic information about the survey respondents:

Table 2. Demographics of survey respondents

		Count*	Percentage
Gender	Male	188	55.3
	Female	152	44.7
	Total	340	100
Age	Under 30yrs	52	15.3
	30+ years	287	84.7
Persons with disability	Yes	9	2.7
	No	330	97.3
Atypical workers**	Yes	72	23.2
	No	238	76.8
Level of education	Primary/Secondary	104	30.6
	Post-secondary	123	36.2
	Tertiary	113	33.2

* The total counts per variable are not identical as the table excludes instances in which data was not provided.

** These consist of workers who work part-time and/or in definite contracts

3.3 In-depth interviews

15 interviews were carried out in order to gather in depth information on salient aspects arising from the survey responses, with a particular focus on the issues of relevance to the four social groups of interest in this study. As can be seen from the table below, all interviewees belonged to one or more of the four groups, namely: women, young persons, PWD, atypical workers.

Table 3. Demographics of interviewees

	Gender	Age	Any disability	Work schedule	Role	Sector of employment
I1F	Female	30+	Yes	Office hours, FT	Educator	Education
I2F	Female	30+	No	FT	Manual worker	Manufacturing
I3F	Female	<30	No	Office hours, FT (+ PT, PT)	Union official (main job)	Union (PT: services)
I4M	Male	30+	Yes	Office hours, PT	Educator	Education
I5M	Male	<30	No	Office hours, PT (then, FT)	Office worker (then Office Manager)	Advisory services
I6F	Female	<30	No	Office hours, FT	Secretary/ Personal assistant (then Bank worker)	Public sector (then Banking)
I7M	Male	<30	No	Office hours, FT	Postal delivery worker (then public officer)	Postal sector (then Public sector)
I8M	Male	<30	No	Office hours, FT	Team leader	Gaming
I9F	Female	<30	No	Office hours, FT	Public officer	Public sector
I10M	Male	30+	Yes	Office hours, FT (+ PT)	IT professional (& services)	IT (then services) (PT: services)
I11F	Female	30+	No	PT	Social work professional	Public sector
I12F	Female	30+	No	FT	Leader	Professional services

I13F	Female	30+	No	FT (+ PT)	Educator	Education
I14F	Female	<30	No	PT(then, FT)	Clerical Assistant (Customer Service Agent)	Education (then Entertainment)
I15F	Female	30+	No	FT (Reduced)	Senior officer	Public sector

Union officials referred potential interviewees to the researchers. The researchers also sought help from the Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) in order to include PWD among the participants. The Commission forwarded an invitation to participate in this study to persons with different disabilities registered with CRPD of an employable age, and interested individuals contacted the researchers.

The researchers sent further information about the study to all the individuals who showed interest in participating. Once these individuals consented to be interviewed, the interview was carried out online or via telephone. Interviews were about 30-40 minutes long and were carried out between July and September 2022. Consent forms were received via email, post, or face-to-face.

The interviews covered similar topics to the focus groups, but focused more on aspects that are of particular interest to women, young persons, PWD, and atypical workers.

CHAPTER 4 - QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

This chapter describes the main results of the survey. Each table contains the total results of the whole sample, and the specific results of women and mothers,² young persons (aged less than 30 years), persons with disability (PWD), and atypical workers (who work part-time and/or on definite contracts).³

Two years after the beginning of the pandemic, the large majority of workers (over 80%) had similar working hours, salary and job security to before the pandemic started. While most workers (52.8%) had comparable workloads, a sizeable minority (39.3%) had a higher workload than before the pandemic started.

A Mann-Whitney test revealed that when compared to men, women were significantly less likely to have experienced a decrease in their job security and more likely to feel that this remained the same ($U=11534.5$, $N1=181$, $N2=144$, $p=.006$, two-tailed).

Young workers were significantly more likely than older ones to have experienced a decrease in working hours and were less likely to have experienced an increase in working hours since the pandemic started ($U=6050.0$, $N1=52$, $N2=280$, $p=.005$, two-tailed).

Table 4. Working hours, workload, salary and job security in comparison to pre-pandemic

		Total	Women	Mothers	Youth	PWD	Atypical
My working hours	Decreased (%)	5.4	2.7	0	17.3	0	1.4
	Remained the same (%)	80.5	83.3	85.7	73.1	85.7	89.9
	Increased (%)	14.1	14.0	14.3	9.6	14.3	8.7
	Total (Count)	333	150	91	52	7	69
My workload	Decreased (%)	8.0	7.6	5.8	13.7	0	9.0
	Remained the same (%)	52.8	47.9	51.2	49.0	100	52.2
	Increased (%)	39.3	44.4	43.0	37.3	0	38.8
	Total (Count)	326	144	86	51	7	67
My salary	Decreased (%)	8.2	4.8	4.5	13.5	0	10.0
	Remained the same (%)	82.4	86.4	87.6	78.8	100	78.6
	Increased (%)	9.4	8.8	7.9	7.7	0	11.4
	Total (Count)	330	147	89	52	6	70
My job security	Decreased (%)	13.2	7.6	10.5	17.6	0	16.4
	Remained the same (%)	83.1	87.5	87.2	74.5	100	79.1
	Increased (%)	3.7	4.9	2.3	7.8	0	4.5
	Total (Count)	325	144	86	51	6	67

33% of the sampled workers had a different work schedule than before the pandemic started. 43% of workers experienced a change in the place, while about 45% of workers experienced a change in their work tasks.

² The variable ‘mothers’ was added in the analysis as it was found to be have stronger and/or different relations than ‘women’ with some variables investigated in this study.

³ While the results have been examined through inferential statistics, for simplification purposes, these are not shown in Tables 4-17. However, when there are statistically significant relations between variables, the inferential results are included in the description of the tables. On the other hand, inferential statistics are noted in the Tables 18-19 but are excluded from their description. The results relating to PWD are not examined through inferential statistics due to the small sample size.

A Mann-Whitney test indicates that mothers' work schedule changed significantly less than that of other workers during the pandemic: (U=9634.500, N1=91, N2=241, p=.04, two-tailed).

Besides, youth were significantly more likely to have experienced a change in their work schedule (working time) since the pandemic started (U=5537.5, N1=50, N2=282, p=.004, two-tailed). Youth were also significantly more likely to have experienced a change in the tasks they do at work (U=5983.0, N1=51, N2=279, p=.045, two-tailed).

Table 5. Work schedule, place and tasks in comparison to pre-pandemic

		Total	Women	Mothers	Youth	PWD	Atypical
My work schedule (the time when I work)	Changed a lot (%)	14.4	12.7	11.0	30.0	25.0	11.8
	Changed a little (%)	18.6	14.7	13.2	18.0	12.5	13.2
	Remained the same (%)	67.0	72.7	75.8	52.0	62.5	75.0
	Total (Count)	333	150	91	50	8	68
The place where I work	Changed a lot (%)	21.2	22.3	23.3	26.9	14.3	22.9
	Changed a little (%)	21.8	18.2	18.9	21.2	28.6	8.6
	Remained the same (%)	57.0	59.5	57.8	51.9	57.1	68.6
	Total (Count)	330	148	90	52	7	70
The tasks that I do at work	Changed a lot (%)	20.5	20.3	18.9	29.4	14.3	23.3
	Changed a little (%)	24.8	23.6	23.3	27.5	28.6	24.6
	Remained the same (%)	54.7	56.1	57.8	43.1	57.1	52.2
	Total (Count)	331	148	90	51	7	69

48.2% of the sampled workers felt more stressed at work than before the pandemic started.

Persons with disability (PWD) were particularly likely to feel more stressed at work.

Table 6. Higher stress levels in comparison to pre-pandemic

	Total	Women	Mothers	Youth	PWD	Atypical
Disagree (%)	28.4	29.1	32.6	23.1	0	31.0
Unsure (%)	23.4	25.2	26.1	23.1	12.5	26.8
Agree (%)	48.2	45.7	41.3	53.8	87.5	42.3
Total (Count)	338	151	92	52	8	71

Only 4.5% of workers thought about leaving their job due to the pandemic, while 73.6% did not.

Mothers considered less leaving their job due to pandemic when compared to other workers: (U=9831.500, N1=92, N2=244, p=.023, two-tailed).

None of the PWD thought about leaving their job due to the pandemic.

Table 7. Thinking about leaving job due to the pandemic

	Total	Women	Mothers	Youth	PWD	Atypical
Disagree (%)	73.6	76.2	82.6	78.8	75.0	70.4
Neutral (%)	22.0	19.9	14.1	15.4	25.0	21.1
Agree (%)	4.5	4.0	3.3	5.8	0	8.5
Total (Count)	337	151	92	52	8	71

44% of workers were generally satisfied with the working conditions in their jobs, while 18.9% were not.

A Mann-Whitney test indicates that youth were significantly less satisfied with their working conditions when compared to older workers ($U=6073.0$, $N_1=52$, $N_2=281$, $p=.037$, two-tailed).

Table 8. Overall satisfied with the working conditions

	Total	Women	Mothers	Youth	PWD	Atypical
Disagree (%)	18.9	19.9	21.7	25.0	12.5	15.5
Neutral (%)	37.1	39.1	30.4	44.2	50.0	40.8
Agree (%)	44.0	41.1	47.8	30.8	37.5	43.7
Total (Count)	334	151	92	52	8	71

67.7% of the respondents stated that their work satisfaction remained the same since the pandemic started, while only 22.2% said that it decreased. On the other hand, 63.6% of workers stated that their work enthusiasm stayed the same. But over a fourth (27.1%) said that it decreased.

Table 9. Overall trends in work satisfaction and enthusiasm since the pandemic started

		Total	Women	Mothers	Youth	PWD	Atypical
Satisfaction	Decreased (%)	22.2	20.1	16.7	28.8	37.5	18.8
	Stayed the same (%)	67.7	69.1	72.2	61.5	62.5	75.4
	Increased (%)	10.2	10.7	11.1	9.6	0	5.8
	Total (Count)	334	149	90	52	8	69
Enthusiasm	Decreased (%)	27.1	25.0	21.1	30.8	33.3	21.4
	Stayed the same (%)	63.6	64.9	68.9	59.6	66.7	71.4
	Increased (%)	9.3	10.1	10.0	9.6	0	7.1
	Total (Count)	332	148	90	52	6	70

While 42.7% of workers believed that the pandemic did not have long-term effects on their career, 21.1% thought it had negative effects, while 11.3% stated it had positive effects.

A Chi Square test revealed that mothers were less likely to think that the pandemic had long-term effects on their career: $X^2(3, N=336) = 8.380$, $p = .039$.

Besides, youth were significantly more likely to believe that the pandemic had positive long-term effects on their career when compared to older workers: $X^2(3, N=336) = 24.970$, $p < .001$.

While none of the PWD said that the pandemic had positive long-term effects on their career, half of them believed that it had negative effects.

Table 10. Long-term effects of the pandemic on career

	Total	Women	Mothers	Youth	PWD	Atypical
No (%)	42.7	48.7	55.4	19.6	50.0	45.1
Yes, it had positive effects (%)	11.3	11.3	8.7	19.6	0	7.0
Yes, it had negative effects (%)	21.1	16.0	15.2	13.7	50.0	21.1
Unsure/ Don't know (%)	24.9	24.0	20.7	47.1	0	26.8
Total (Count)	337	150	92	51	8	71

Since the pandemic started, 78.8% of workers felt supported by their colleagues, 66.3% felt that their manager supported them, while 64.4% believed to have been treated fairly at work. However, 56.2% of workers stated that tension amongst colleagues increased, while 60.8% stated that dealing with work clients became more stressful.

Half of the PWD stated that their colleagues did not supported them, while nearly all stated that dealing with work clients became more stressful.

Table 11. Work dynamics since the pandemic started

		Total	Women	Mothers	Youth	PWD	Atypical
My colleagues supported me	Disagree (%)	10.3	9.3	9.1	4.2	50.0	6.8
	Unsure (%)	11.0	11.6	10.4	10.4	0	20.3
	Agree (%)	78.8	79.1	80.5	85.4	50.0	72.9
	Total (Count)	292	129	77	48	6	59
My manager supported me	Disagree (%)	16.3	15.0	14.8	9.8	14.3	15.0
	Unsure (%)	17.3	18.8	17.3	25.5	14.3	11.7
	Agree (%)	66.3	66.2	67.9	64.7	71.4	73.3
	Total (Count)	300	133	81	51	7	60
I was treated fairly at work	Disagree (%)	18.3	19.7	17.2	15.7	33.3	13.8
	Unsure (%)	17.3	14.8	14.9	19.6	0	16.9
	Agree (%)	64.4	65.6	67.8	64.7	66.7	69.2
	Total (Count)	312	142	87	51	6	65
Tension amongst colleagues increased	Disagree (%)	25.6	24.8	23.8	16.3	0	21.9
	Unsure (%)	18.2	17.0	15.5	24.5	25.0	20.3
	Agree (%)	56.2	58.2	60.7	59.2	75.0	57.8
	Total (Count)	313	141	84	49	4	64
Dealing with work clients became more stressful	Disagree (%)	22.2	27.1	30.3	23.8	16.7	15.0
	Unsure (%)	17.0	11.6	13.2	19.0	0	23.3
	Agree (%)	60.8	61.2	56.6	57.1	83.3	61.7
	Total (Count)	288	129	76	42	6	60

51.7% of workers felt at great risk of getting Covid-19 at work. 55.7% felt that at work they had little control over whether they get infected. 54.9% stated to have received adequate training on how to reduce chances of getting infected. 65.5% had enough equipment and procedures to protect themselves against Covid-19. 58.6% said that their management communicates properly on issues relating to Covid-19, and 58.4% believed that their managers cared about their well-being. Finally, 81.8% of the sampled workers feared getting Covid-19 and transmitting it to their loved ones.

At work, atypical workers were more likely to have enough equipment and procedures to protect themselves against Covid-19 when compared to other workers (U=6594.0, N1=232,

N2=69, p=.009, two-tailed). They were also more likely to feel that their management communicates properly on issues relating to Covid-19 (U=6337.5, N1=231, N2=68, p=.008, two-tailed).

Most PWD tended to believe that they did not receive adequate training on how to reduce chances of getting infected.

Table 12. Pandemic-related health and safety at work

		Total	Women	Mothers	Youth	PWD	Atypical
I am at great risk of getting Covid-19	Disagree (%)	25.2	22.7	32.1	26.0	25.0	21.2
	Unsure (%)	23.1	22.7	15.5	26.0	12.5	22.7
	Agree (%)	51.7	54.6	52.4	48.0	62.5	56.1
	Total (Count)	321	141	84	50	8	66
I have little control over whether I get infected	Disagree (%)	22.8	23.9	27.8	22.0	25.0	18.8
	Unsure (%)	21.5	24.6	24.1	22.0	12.5	28.1
	Agree (%)	55.7	51.5	48.1	56.0	62.5	53.1
	Total (Count)	316	134	79	50	8	64
I received adequate training on how to reduce chances of getting infected	Disagree (%)	27.6	27.0	24.4	28.0	57.1	25.0
	Unsure (%)	17.5	16.8	15.9	28.0	14.3	12.5
	Agree (%)	54.9	56.2	59.8	44.0	28.6	62.5
	Total (Count)	315	137	82	50	7	64
I have enough equipment and procedures to protect myself against Covid-19	Disagree (%)	18.0	18.6	18.4	23.1	25.0	10.1
	Unsure (%)	16.5	13.8	10.3	15.4	37.5	11.6
	Agree (%)	65.5	67.6	71.3	61.5	37.5	78.3
	Total (Count)	328	145	87	52	8	69
My management communicates properly on issues relating to Covid-19	Disagree (%)	21.6	22.5	18.6	21.6	25.0	11.8
	Unsure (%)	19.8	13.4	16.3	21.6	25.0	16.2
	Agree (%)	58.6	64.1	65.1	56.9	50.0	72.1
	Total (Count)	324	142	86	51	8	68
My managers care about my well-being	Disagree (%)	18.0	15.9	15.6	18.0	12.5	15.2
	Unsure (%)	23.5	25.5	23.3	20.0	37.5	15.2
	Agree (%)	58.4	58.6	61.1	62.0	50.0	69.7
	Total (Count)	327	145	90	50	8	66
I fear getting Covid-19 and transmitting it to my loved ones	Disagree (%)	11.7	11.2	15.3	5.9	12.5	14.7
	Unsure (%)	6.5	4.2	4.7	7.8	12.5	7.4
	Agree (%)	81.8	84.6	80.0	86.3	75.0	77.9
	Total (Count)	325	143	85	51	8	68

Since the pandemic started, the majority of the sampled workers (61.5%) never worked from home, while 24.7% worked from home less than 50% of the time and 13.8% worked from home more than 50% of the time.

Mann-Whitney tests revealed that women were significantly more likely to have worked from home when compared to men (U=11584.5, N1=181, N2=144, p=.001, two-tailed). Mothers were even more likely than women in general to have worked from home: (U=9439.0, N1=93, N2=246, p=.004, two-tailed).

On the other hand, atypical workers were less likely to have worked from home than typical workers since the pandemic started (U=7219.0, N1=238, N2=72, p=.018, two-tailed).

Most PWD also never worked from home.

Table 13. Extent of working from home since the pandemic started

	Total	Women	Mothers	Youth	PWD	Atypical
I never worked from home (%)	61.5	52.0	50.5	61.5	77.8	75.0
I worked from home <50% /time (%)	24.7	28.3	26.9	28.8	11.1	15.3
I worked from home >50% /time (%)	13.8	19.7	22.6	9.6	11.1	9.7
Total (Count)	340	152	93	52	9	72

Out of those who worked from home, 78.5% had the necessary resources to work effectively, 93.8% believed to have the necessary knowledge and skills to work effectively, 82.3% had the right environment to work effectively, 79.8% had assistance from work when required, 76% felt trusted by their management, and 74% felt more productive when they work from home.

A Mann-Whitney test revealed that significantly more women than men felt more productive when WFH (U=1666.0, N1=188, N2=152, p=.041, two-tailed).

Atypical workers were less likely to state that when they worked from home, they had the necessary knowledge and skills to work effectively (U=751.0, N1=98, N2=17, p=.042, two-tailed).

Table 14. Working from home - conditions and outcomes

		Total	Women	Mothers	Youth	PWD	Atypical
I have the necessary resources to work effectively	Disagree (%)	14.6	13.9	15.6	5.0	50.0	11.8
	Unsure (%)	6.9	6.9	11.1	0	0	0
	Agree (%)	78.5	79.2	73.3	95.0	50.0	88.2
	Total (Count)	130	72	45	20	2	17
I have the necessary knowledge and skills to work effectively	Disagree (%)	1.6	1.4	2.2	0	0	5.9
	Unsure (%)	4.7	6.9	6.7	10.0	0	5.9
	Agree (%)	93.8	91.7	91.1	90.0	100	88.2
	Total (Count)	129	72	45	20	2	17
I have the right environment to work effectively	Disagree (%)	8.5	8.3	8.9	5.0	0	11.8
	Unsure (%)	9.2	8.3	11.1	15.0	50.0	11.8
	Agree (%)	82.3	83.3	80.0	80.0	50.0	76.6
	Total (Count)	130	72	45	20	2	17
Assistance from work is available when required	Disagree (%)	5.4	6.9	6.5	10.5	0	11.1
	Unsure (%)	14.7	16.7	19.6	5.3	50.0	11.1
	Agree (%)	79.8	76.4	73.9	84.2	50.0	77.8
	Total (Count)	129	72	46	19	2	18
I feel trusted by my management	Disagree (%)	11.6	11.1	6.7	5.0	50.0	5.9
	Unsure (%)	12.4	16.7	20.0	10.0	0	17.6
	Agree (%)	76.0	72.2	73.3	85.0	50.0	76.5
	Total (Count)	129	72	45	20	2	17
I am more productive	Disagree (%)	7.1	7.0	6.8	10.0	0	5.9
	Unsure (%)	18.9	11.3	15.9	5.0	50.0	17.6
	Agree (%)	74.0	81.7	77.3	85.0	50.0	76.5
	Total (Count)	127	71	44	20	2	17

61.8% of workers expressed their preference for a mixture of WFH and from the workplace. A minority preferred WFH (19.8%) or working from their workplace (16.8%) only.

Table 15. Working from home vs workplace

	Total	Women	Mothers	Youth	PWD	Atypical
Working from home (%)	19.8	19.2		30.0	50.0	16.7
Working from my workplace (%)	16.8	12.3		15.0	0	33.3
A mixture of both (%)	61.8	68.5		55.0	50.0	50.0
No preference/ Not applicable (%)	1.5	0		0	0	0
Total (Count)	131	73		20	2	18

When compared to before the pandemic started: while 57.1% felt that their mental health stayed the same/ unsure, 38.4% said it worsened; while 55.7% believed that their present level of happiness stayed the same/ unsure, 39% said it got worse; while 57.9% stated their physical health stayed the same/ unsure, 35.3% stated it got worse; while 65.9% said that their family finances stayed the same/ unsure, 27.2% said they got worse; while 71.8% felt that their family relations stayed the same/ unsure, only 16% stated it got worse; while 65.6% said that their relations with friends stayed the same/ unsure, 27.5% thought that these worsened.

Nearly all PWD stated that their present physical health got worse when compared to pre-pandemic levels.

Table 16. Wellbeing compared to before the pandemic started

		Total	Women	Mothers	Youth	PWD	Atypical
Mental health	Is/are better (%)	4.5	5.9	5.4	7.8	0	5.6
	Stayed the same/ Unsure (%)	57.1	50.7	52.7	47.1	55.6	61.1
	Got worse (%)	38.4	43.4	41.9	45.1	44.4	33.3
	Total (Count)	336	152	93	51	9	72
Level of happiness	Is/are better (%)	5.4	6.0	3.2	11.8	0	6.9
	Stayed the same/ Unsure (%)	55.7	53.0	57.0	47.1	66.7	61.1
	Got worse (%)	39.0	41.1	39.8	41.2	33.3	31.9
	Total (Count)	336	151	93	51	9	72
Physical health	Is/are better (%)	6.8	7.9	8.6	15.4	0	5.6
	Stayed the same/ Unsure (%)	57.9	53.3	51.6	53.8	11.1	65.3
	Got worse (%)	35.3	38.8	39.8	30.8	88.9	29.2
	Total (Count)	337	152	93	52	9	72
Family finances	Is/are better (%)	6.9	6.1	6.7	5.8	0	14.1
	Stayed the same/ Unsure (%)	65.9	67.7	65.6	55.8	55.6	63.4
	Got worse (%)	27.2	26.4	27.8	38.5	44.4	22.5
	Total (Count)	334	148	90	52	9	71
Family relationships	Is/are better (%)	12.2	13.3	10.9	19.6	22.2	13.9
	Stayed the same/ Unsure (%)	71.8	72.0	75.0	68.6	66.7	79.2
	Got worse (%)	16.0	14.7	14.1	11.8	11.1	6.9
	Total (Count)	337	150	92	51	9	72
Relationship with my friends	Is/are better (%)	6.9	5.3	4.3	7.8	11.1	8.3
	Stayed the same/ Unsure (%)	65.6	68.7	68.5	66.7	66.7	68.1
	Got worse (%)	27.5	26.0	27.2	25.5	22.2	23.6
	Total (Count)	334	150	92	51	9	72

While 84.6% of the sampled workers remained in the same job they had in January 2020, 15.4% had a different one when they were surveyed. Out of the latter, a third (32.7%) stated that they changed their job due to the pandemic.

The relationship between change in job and age was significant: $X^2(1, N=337) = 11.704, p = .001$. While 30.8% of youth did not have the same main job that they had in 2020, the figure dipped to 12.3% among older workers.

Atypical workers who changed their job since January 2020 were more likely than typical workers to state that they did so due to the pandemic: $X^2(1, N=46) = 6.240, p = .012$.

Table 17. Kept same main job since January 2020

	Total	Women	Mothers	Youth	PWD	Atypical
Yes (%)	84.6	84.8	87.0	69.2	100	78.9
No (%)	15.4	15.2	13.0	30.8	0	21.1
<i>Out of whom due to the pandemic (%)</i>	32.7	31.8	22.6	20.0	/	60.0
Total (Count)	338	151	92	52	9	71

Spearman's rank correlation revealed significant negative correlations between 'more stressed' and: 'satisfied with working conditions', 'increased work satisfaction', 'increased work enthusiasm', 'colleagues support', 'manager support', and 'treated fairly'. On the other hand, 'more stressed' was positively correlated with 'tension among colleagues' and 'increased stress with clients'.

Apart from their interaction with 'more stressed', 'job satisfaction' and 'job enthusiasm' were significantly positively correlated with each other, and with: 'satisfied with working conditions', 'colleagues support', 'manager support', and 'treated fairly'. On the other hand, they were negatively correlated with 'tension among colleagues'.

Table 18. Spearman's rank correlation of selected variables – Part 1

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. More stressed								
2. Satisfied with working conditions	-.386**							
3. Increased work satisfaction	-.245**	.434**						
4. Increased work enthusiasm	-.288**	.447**	.749**					
5. Colleagues support	-.180**	.270**	.305**	.295**				
6. Manager support	-.294**	.432**	.420**	.362**	.549**			
7. Treated fairly	-.284**	.474**	.382**	.376**	.364**	.658**		
8. Tension among colleagues	.405**	-.230**	-.164**	-.244**	-.178**	-.163**	-.235**	
9. Increased stress with clients	.354**	-.182**	-0.067	-0.110	-0.076	-0.092	-0.083	.428**

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Spearman's rank correlation revealed significant positive correlations between 'more stressed' and: 'increased working hours', 'increased workload', 'change in work schedule', 'change in work tasks', 'decreased mental health' and 'decreased physical health'. 'More stressed' was also negatively correlated with 'increased job security'.

‘Increased workload’ was positively correlated with ‘increased working hours’, ‘change in work schedule’, ‘change in work tasks’, ‘more stressed’, and ‘decreased mental health’.

Age was positively correlated with ‘increased working hours’ and negatively correlated with ‘change in work schedule’ and ‘change in work tasks’.

Table 19. Spearman’s rank correlation of selected variables – Part 2

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Increased working hours									
2. Increased workload	.343**								
3. Increased job security	.167**	0.010							
4. Change in work schedule	.132*	.156**	-0.066						
5. Change in work location	0.045	0.082	0.007	.410**					
6. Change in work tasks	.207**	.322**	-0.043	.312**	.319**				
7. More stressed	.123*	.280**	-.233**	.114*	0.048	.217**			
8. Age	.155**	0.043	0.007	-.160**	-0.056	-.111*	-0.056		
9. Decreased mental health	-0.021	.113*	-.149**	0.031	.120*	.151**	.309**	-0.036	
10. Decreased physical health	0.049	0.100	-0.100	0.047	0.012	0.081	.230**	0.082	.433**

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

CHAPTER 5 - ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESULTS

This chapter provides an analysis of the main results of the empirical research carried out in this project, through focus groups, a survey and interviews.

The sudden experience of the pandemic in 2020 together with the government's reactions greatly disrupted society, including the lives of the research participants. Their work, social sphere, routines and certainties were affected. The impact of the pandemic on the participants depended among others on the government's strategic decisions, the evolving effects of the pandemic on the health care system, their employment status and sector, their personal characteristics (such as gender, age, marital status, disabilities etc), and other circumstances including luck (such as whether an individual or their loved ones got infected, and the gravity of such consequences). Having said that, many of the Covid-19 work-related experiences of participants were shared across demographics and other life circumstances. Thus, the first section discusses the overall trends in relation to the following topics: careers and working conditions; WFH; work-related attitudes; occupational health and safety; and life outside work. The second section focuses on some specific themes in relation to each of the four groups of interest in this study, namely, women (and mothers), youth, PWD and atypical workers.

5.1 Overall trends

Irrespective of their circumstances, during the initial stages of the pandemic, people were united by a ubiquitous sense of fear. F5M, who worked in a government authority, disclosed the constant anxiety of living in uncertain territory where: *“you don't know what's going to happen”*. F6M, a middle manager confessed that: *“our fear was always that if someone gets sick, we need to replace that team member, someone needs to work more, one 12-hour shift after another. You might even have to sleep at work! There was that risk... [When my working hours are ready] I want to go home [not remain at work]... It is true that you make more money, but money is not everything”*. F7M and F9M talked about the difficulties created for some workers in essential services who had to stay in alternative residences away from their homes during the peak of the pandemic (for instance, if they had vulnerable persons at home, or if they worked in elderly homes). Forced isolation and prolonged fear started leading to exhaustion. F4M, another person who also worked in a government authority stated that now: *“people are tired”*. And as became apparent during the qualitative data collection, over the previous two years, respondents gradually started caring less about the pandemic. Encouraged by the protection offered by vaccines, but also through a sense of learned helplessness derived from exhaustion, individuals' drive to return to some kind of normality grew stronger and stronger. F7M, a health carer confessed that: *“we're always full... [with patients in hospital but] we have to keep going”*.

The 1918 influenza has been labelled as the ‘forgotten pandemic’ as little literature exists about it. People who experienced it didn't want to talk about it (Little, 2020). Perhaps they just wanted to forget it and just return to their normal lives. A similar type of feeling appears to be experienced by the research participants in relation to the contemporary pandemic. F2M, who worked in the armed forces, gave an apt description of his cathartic experience when he returned to a bar for the first time after the pandemic restrictions started being lifted. Breathing a sigh of relief, he said: *“I felt like I was born again, because I felt like: what's the reason for working? Just to live, with no enjoyment... [Over the past two years] social*

interaction has almost been cut off completely... [When the pandemic measures were decreased] I felt like I was taken out of a cage!". The tiny geographical size of Malta accentuated the feelings of claustrophobia felt by the research participants, leading to a great drive to leave the country, even if just for a holiday. In the words of F4M: *"I would like to travel abroad, to say: I got rid of Malta"*.

Thus, when the empirical data was gathered two years into the pandemic, the country and its people, including its workers, were intent on returning back to 'normality'. The sections below investigate the extent to which workers managed to transition to some kind of normality and the reasons for their success or otherwise.

5.1.1 Careers and working conditions

- Change in employment and perceived long-term effects

The survey showed that the large majority of respondents did not change their job during the first two years of the pandemic. Out of the 15.4% who did so, only a third changed their work due to the pandemic. This finding indicates that the pandemic did not exert catastrophic effects on the employment situation of the respondents. It also reflects the fact that Malta's unemployment rate was only minimally affected during the worst period of the pandemic, and that workers in general managed to keep their job. This is not to say that there weren't people whose employment was affected gravely. As stated by F11M, a trade union official, *"the private sector suffered"* from the consequences of lack of work.

The majority of the survey respondents felt that the pandemic did not have long-term effects on their career or were unsure about potential repercussions. In other words, for most respondents, the impact of the work-related disruption was temporary, or at least, was not believed to be influential on their future career development. Having said that, a fifth of the respondents pointed out that the pandemic had negative long-term effects on their careers, occasionally including job changes. There were also others who experienced delays in their promotions which they would be unable to fully recover. For example, negotiations of collective agreements were stalled for many months, creating uncertainty for the affected workers. Everything was stuck in relation to promotions since the HR's efforts were directed elsewhere. F6M stated that: *"if there is a delay, the delay remains there, you cannot get it [that is, the time that was lost] back"*. According to F7M: *"now you need to try to change that delay in your favour when you go to discussions to get the things you want. That's what you have to do"*.

Some participants recounted how opportunities for training and development were also stalled. F2M, an army officer, asserted that career wise, the pandemic: *"put me back two years. I had a plan leading to my retirement"* from the army that was disrupted. He could not go abroad to carry out studies that would have helped his next job after leaving the army. He said that by going abroad now, he would have less time to study for his next promotion in the army, and that would also influence his pension. It appears that his age worked against him, as he had less time, when compared to younger colleagues, to get promoted before pension.

- Current working conditions

Within two years from the start of the pandemic, the large majority of the surveyed workers were experiencing pre-pandemic levels of working hours and salary. As the pandemic started getting under control and the government began scaling back its measures, it appears that organizations were also settling into a 'new' normal. However, workers in the manufacturing

sector were among the minority of respondents who, two years into the pandemic, were still experiencing decreased working hours. Besides, workers in the accommodation or food service and in transport and storage are among those whose salary was lower than before the pandemic started.

While overall, the working hours and salary information captured by the survey indicate a return to normality, there is a concerning trend experienced by 39.3% of the respondents who felt that their workload grew during the pandemic. The increase in workload is correlated to changes in work schedule and the tasks performed at work. The effects of ICT and home working on workload will be explored further down.

Workload appears to have been influenced by the reduced number of workers on duty due to quarantine, which was still mandatory when the survey was carried out. The worst hit sectors also lost workers during the pandemic. Health care workers were among those who continued suffering from greater workload due to the lingering effects of the pandemic in hospitals, resulting in more patients and fewer staff. Besides, the load on health workers also increased due to the high levels of job resignations. For example, many foreign workers were lured to work in other countries through better working and living conditions. This situation is so alarming that the government developed specific measures as part of the Recovery and Resilience Plan to understand and improve the conditions of foreign workers in the health sector.

I13F, a woman in a leadership role in professional services mentioned the various new challenges that she encountered during the early stages of the pandemic, including the need to plan ahead for her organisation, which is something that might not burden low level employees: *“I had pressure to keep the pipeline going and have a forward view of the pipeline going. There was also pressure for outstanding client payments to be settled. Obviously, like others I had to get accustomed to new ways of working”*.

In some places of work where the problem of staff scarcity was more or less solved as the pandemic eased, the challenges created at the peak of the pandemic persisted. For example, F3F, who worked in the banking and finance sector, stated that: *“we used to have less staff during the peak of the pandemic. The amount of work was too much for the amount of workers. This created an enormous backlog... Whether or not this created tension depended on the character of the individual. One worker took a career break as she couldn’t cope with such backlog”*. I3F who worked in a trade union, also mentioned the stress and pressure to catch up with tasks that could not be done during the peak of the pandemic.

- The use of ICT

The surveyed workers’ workload also increased due to restructuring exercises and new procedures that were enforced in the pandemic. A change in the preferred methods of organisational communication was mentioned by several focus group participants and interviewees. F10M, who worked in a public entity, mentioned the increased use of some non-technological methods of communication such as messages on notice-boards and letters, in locations where staff did not have access to computers. However, there was a general agreement among participants on the greater reliance on emails during the pandemic. F2M was one of those who complained about *“excessive increase of the blessed emails”*. He was annoyed to: *“receive emails for things to be done ASAP”*, which made him feel that he was expected to read emails all the time. The more frequent use of emails was also viewed as

leading to more red tape, as informal face-to-face or telephone communication started to be replaced by more formal and permanent emails.

Focus group participants complained in particular against receiving emails after work, which managers appear to be increasingly expecting workers to read (and sometimes answer) before the next working day. In relation to this, F4M emphasized the importance of delegating duties during work hours. He stated that receiving emails after work may *“affect the person mentally and physically... as if one tends to worry... this disturbs one’s calm and can lead to accidents at work”* the following day. Participants were vocal about their right to disconnect after they finish work. F2M was concerned that he: *“witnessed persons sending [work-related] emails at 10pm”*, and that this was becoming the trend.

It is not easy to disconnect, not only due to many individuals’ psychological drive to check emails, but also because different media are being used to reach workers. F5M confessed that he doesn’t open emails after work, but: *“then they send you the same information in chat groups”*. Chat groups appear to have become more commonly used at work during the pandemic, and while they served the purpose of keeping workers connected together during a time when they could not do so physically, they also proved to be disruptive and time consuming. I15F remarked that when Microsoft Teams became a chat system: *“people call you in at every and any minute, and it’s difficult to plan your day out... You did have to find a new balance to the new tools that were available, cause they did come with a new set of dynamics... You’re expected to be available on Teams, if not it’s like you’re off from working, so to speak, cause you need to give off that message, comfort that you are actually working at your desk. That opened up a whole wave of communication which you had to manage to find time to do other things”*.

Another type of difficulty with chat groups was that they were sometimes used for both informal discussion and work. F2M disclosed he may *“see some ninety messages [on Whatsapp]. Seventy would be jokes and then... there would be the roster”*. Apart from making it hard for workers to disconnect, sending important work related instructions on social media such as WhatsApp chat groups increases their risk of getting lost amid a clutter of less important or even non-work related information.

Echoing the experiences of other participants in the study, I8M, who used to work in the gaming industry during the peak of the pandemic stated that by WFH: *“the workload increased... I started noticing that time ceased to exist. So usually, when 17.00hrs would arrive, you close your laptop and head home. This changed. You kept going on. Colleagues keep sending you messages, things crop up, then it’s 19.00hrs, 20.00hrs, and you keep going on... during the early stages this affected me”*. He said that eventually proper boundaries were drawn and *“there was an understanding that everyone should stop working at a certain time”*.

Easier access to meetings due to ICT sometimes increased workloads. For example, I15F, a senior officer in the public sector, remarked that when attendance to EU level meetings that typically required overseas travel started to be carried out online, more officers than before were asked to attend them.

One should here note that increased access to ICT is not always interpreted as a burden by workers. This is the case of F3F, who worked in banking and finance, and who was provided with access to her work from home during the pandemic. She was not officially given

approval to do telework and she was not paid to work when she returned home from her workplace. However, she ended up doing work in her free time and she appeared to be happy with the arrangement, saying that: *“It took away my freedom, but at the same time I am more relaxed at work as I can allocate the work myself”*. By doing some of her normal work from home in her free time, she had a lower workload when she was at her workplace.

5.1.2 Working from home (WFH)

In line with Briguglio (2021), the survey respondents who worked for at least some of the time from home since the pandemic started expressed positive attitudes towards this experience. In the words of I12F: *“for me it was a positive experience. I used to spend my life at work, and to be honest it was a relief to work from home. It changed my life essentially.”*

Almost all of these respondents believed to have the necessary knowledge and skills to work effectively. But interviewees such as I15F also noted the *“learning curve”* required by those who were not used to WFH. Similarly, I13F, an educator who shifted to online teaching, admitted that she experienced difficulties in adjusting to new ways of working: *“there was the stress to get to grips with the technology side of things, and new ways of working. So, for instance one day I’m working on a whiteboard and the next day I needed to prepare a lesson on PowerPoint. I know how to use PowerPoint but I don’t use it all the time, you know? Your skills may be somewhat rusty and you need to go back to them. It takes time”*. She also showed her frustration that: *“some students would not even bother to show up online”*.

About four fifths stated that they had the right environment and the necessary resources to work effectively, and assistance from work was available when required. Some organisations were particularly proactive in helping their workers adapt to the new reality. I12F said that: *“from an operational perspective the company went into overdrive to see how swiftly it can organise itself for its extensive staff to work from home”*. The company ensured the provision of proper IT infrastructure and bandwidth, took care of security issues of WFH and so on.

The survey respondents’ positive perspectives might explain why the changing of the workplace was not correlated to work overload. Focus group participants and interviewees mentioned several beneficial aspects of WFH, such as reduced time losses both related to travel and disturbances, not having to wake up early, and using less car fuel. They also mentioned the reduction in traffic which helps to reduce pollution at a national level, and benefits for the organisation such as lower electricity consumption. Considering the above positive results, it is not surprising that out of those who had the opportunity to work from home, three fourths felt more productive at home than at the office. Corroborating this result, F4M who worked in a government authority commented that: *“we get more work done at [home]”*. I12F elaborated similar thoughts: *“for me, being at home in peace and quiet, rather than in an open plan office means I can concentrate, I can close the door, I don’t have any distractions.”* Not being physically present at the office gave her more control on the amount and type of contact that other workers have with her: *“if I don’t have time for you, either I won’t pick up or else I will hang up”*. But feeling more productive does not necessarily mean that organisations become more effective. I15F admitted that: *“when you’re at the office, there’s a lot of information flow, that isn’t put down on paper... I’m not talking about gossip now, I’m talking about procedural information flow. And that did, at some point on the long run, rub off as a difficulty, eventually, because everybody was isolated. I think in big corporate countries they put a policy into everything basically [...] but in Malta we tend to not write the obvious basically and we were missing that, that obvious understanding wasn’t*

so obvious anymore". One should here note that some foreign research also expressed doubts on productivity while WFH (e.g. Kitagawa et al., 2021; Morikawa, 2022; Stoker et al., 2022).

I12F also noted that WFH shifted workplace dynamics when employers delegated more power to employees. But such delegation of power could be taken back when the pandemic emergency receded, and organisations started returning to their previous ways of working. This change was not always easy or even welcomed by workers. I14F, a young woman working on a part time basis while furthering her studies, was unhappy at work. Being asked to work from home was a relief to her, and she found it difficult to return to work when requested: *"I struggled at the time. I had managed to find a routine of how to work, what to do, in very loose terms I was my own boss... When we returned, the shift, there was the uncomfortableness of going back to the office, when we were still very 'fresh' at the beginning of the pandemic, so it was already uncomfortable just because of that. But then to readjust I struggled... I was then given the previous tasks. I had adjusted, I had liked the change, but then it was kind of taken away from me. And that kind of put me down again, you know?"*.

However, there was a significant minority among the survey respondents who was not convinced about the advantages of WFH. Focus group participants and interviewees elaborated some relevant negative aspects. F11M, a union official, was particularly vocal on the reasons for disliking WFH. He resented the apathy that home working creates: *"if you go out, you change your routine, when you get dressed and go out... I used to get out of bed and went straight to the desk in my pajamas... and when I have a meeting, I put on a shirt!"*. He said that after two weeks of WFH, he started missing workplace interaction: *"even discussing certain problems with colleagues, being [face-to-face] is one thing, picking up the phone is totally different. The computer helps but still, that physical thing that is there... the expression, the body language"*. The loss of physical presence at work was also vividly depicted by F1F, an educator: *"it's good to work from home, at least once a week. It reduces pollution and so on. But, as a teacher, I don't like it. I like to see human contact, to see body language... To organise [physical] activities for them"*. It was also remarked by participants that Maltese culture may be particularly conducive to face-to-face interaction, and perhaps Maltese people might miss it more than people with other cultural backgrounds. At the same time, I12F opined that social needs depend on character: *"I believe there are certain people who draw strength from being with people etc. so it affects them negatively if they aren't around others. On the other hand, I don't draw particular strength from being with people. I am very comfortable in my own skin being alone"*.

F11M highlighted the difficulties of having more than one person WFH at the same time. He recounted the challenge of trying to do teleworking in the same room with his wife present, especially due to the disturbances created when either or both of them conducted online meetings. He stated that he had to find a separate room. He also mentioned his unease to speak about work-related matters in front of his wife: *"if I have a meeting at work, and my colleagues are there, that is fine, I am not bothered. But if I am at home, I don't want anyone near me in a meeting. Even when I'm talking, it's amazing [that I don't feel comfortable]. Even when you receive a phone call at home, you don't feel comfortable communicating. I sometimes go down to the garage! As in the garage I am alone, comfortable. I can even hold a meeting in the garage. When I have meetings with the executive, I don't want anyone with me - no one. Not even the dog. As it would disturb me with its barking. There is a line that is easy to break, and makes you mentally uncomfortable. If I had any choice, I would never work from home."*

Another type of challenge shared by focus groups participants and which is particularly relevant to the Maltese situation was related to construction, which never stopped, not even during the peak of the pandemic. Focus group participants stated that the continuous thumping of construction made it difficult for some people to work from home, and might have even led to or accentuated existing mental problems. The participants also mentioned other challenges such as greater stresses on couples due to spending more time together, and problems with internet connections.

Considering the advantages and disadvantages, most survey respondents who worked at least partly from home since the pandemic started, stated that if given the opportunity, they would like to have blended work, doing some work from home and some from office. However, one should also note that the majority of the surveyed workers never worked from home since the pandemic started. Many could not do telework due to the nature of their jobs. Others might have rejected the opportunity when this was offered to them. It is also noteworthy that the focus group participants who did not work from home showed a huge aversion to doing so. In some cases, WFH was technically possible, but the workers were not given such opportunity by their management. Or if they were given the opportunity, this was done only very briefly and reluctantly during the lock down. F5M, who worked in a government authority asserted that: *“they only gave us permission [to work from home] as they were forced, and then you feel... you feel like: but I’m performing my work and you still don’t you trust me? I’m still performing my work”*.

Managers sometimes only permitted workers to do telework on the basis of specific personal circumstances, which led to feelings of unfairness among workers. F3F, a woman who worked in banking and finance, was not permitted to work from home, and complained that the option to do telework was only provided to: *“those who have children work from home, and the other because he is vulnerable... And then we have to carry the work pressure of the front liners. I was discriminated”*.

It appears that a substantial section of managers frowned upon telework and did not trust their workers to work from home. The survey showed that out of the respondents who worked from home, only three fourths felt trusted by their management. This insufficient trust might have been due to management’s bad experiences with teleworking. F9M, a middle manager, stated that during the initial stages of the pandemic, most office workers at his organisation were teleworking. But the organisation stopped almost all telework after finding widespread abuse: *“the company started noticing the lack of [vacation] leave, [and] sick [leave] that was being taken. Do you understand? They start[ed] looking at everything. No sick leave was being taken?! God bless!”*. F9M continued that since his organisation found about the abuse, it started approving very few requests for telework, and according to him: *“they are right in doing so”*.

In order for home working to be effective, there needs to be motivated workers who have the necessarily skills and abilities together with an enabling environment to do their work. There also needs to be appropriate methods of evaluation of such work. More professional employees would presumably require less frequent evaluation. It is not easy to have all components in place to guarantee effective work. But the good intentioned research participants were angered and felt let down by their organisation when they were not given such opportunity. This feeling was aggravated when it was perceived that physical presence at the workplace would result in greater risks of contagion. Reflecting on not being permitted

to work from home during the pandemic, F5M, who worked in a government authority, admitted: *“that created anger... The culture of certain management that needs to see you there”*. Similarly, F3F, who could have easily done part of her work from home as it involved back-office work stated that she could not do so as not all managers trusted their workers: *“they think that being at home I would stay watching television and waste time”*.

In line with Stoker et al. (2022) who concluded that WFH might be less effective if leaders do not change their behaviours, some participants complained against the mentality of managers, especially older ones, who were unwilling or unable to adapt their managerial style to the evolving needs. F5M complained that: *“there is that mentality that if he is not seeing you with his eyes, visually, you will not do your job. But there are other methods to evaluate”*. As an example, he mentioned evaluation on the basis of the quantity of tasks that are carried every day. Some workers believed that the culture of traditional managers was hard to change. In frustration, F3F stated that: *“management is the problem... And it is of no use trying to convince them. They need to be forced to change!”*. Part of this unwillingness to change might have derived from insufficient ICT skills. F5M stated that younger managers were more IT oriented and permissive towards workers who wished to work from home.

Even when workers were given the opportunity to work from home, they sometimes felt as if they were being accused of cheating. According to F4M, despite the fact that his work from home could be monitored very closely through technology: *“when you go back to work [management] expects more than you did from home... When you go back to normal work they act as if you were on holiday: ‘now let's keep going’. They don't realize that you are making every effort to convince them that you are doing your job”*.

5.1.3 Work-related attitudes

In general, two years into the pandemic, the survey respondents' feelings of job security were at pre-pandemic levels. F11M, a union official dealing with the public sector stated that: *“at first, we had a lot of queries from our workers...a lot of anxiety was evident. Then after a while, things really changed. A lot of tension on quarantine periods...then we had a relatively quiet period”*. As expected, participants working in the private sector were more likely to suffer from diminished job security when compared to those working in the public sector. Having said that, some workers in the public sector experienced difficulties in relation to their part-time jobs in the private sector. For example, F10M lost his part-time job altogether: *“I was working PT at the time the pandemic hit us, and I had to stop my PT work due to risks of cross-contamination since my PT job involved more exposure to clients. Then [it] eventually stopped altogether since the company I was working with was making PT workers redundant”*.

One of the worst effects experienced by survey participants two years within the pandemic was stress. About half of the respondents felt more stressed at work than before the pandemic started. Quantitative analysis revealed that stress was correlated to greater working hours and workload, while being inversely correlated to job security. Stress was also related to changes in work schedule and changes in the work tasks. For most people, all change is stressful to some degree, and the pandemic brought about considerable changes in various spheres of people's lives, including work.

Some organisations were more proactive than others in the management of employee stress. For example, F2M who worked in the armed forces, stated that: *“courses are being held to*

train higher ranks deal with mental issues of workers. Also the clinic made sure that a psychologist is readily available... The army cannot afford having workers with psychological problems". F3F who worked in a bank, said that her organisation had an agreement with an outside organisation to provide counselling services to bank employees if required. However, F3F remarked that when she tried to use the service, the appointment given to her was for a month later, which was found to be unreasonable.

Despite the relatively high stress levels, very few workers thought about leaving their job due to the pandemic. This could be due to perceived lack of better alternatives. Stress might not necessarily lower job satisfaction. Indeed, less than a fifth of the sampled workers admitted feeling unhappy with their working conditions. The work satisfaction and enthusiasm of most respondents at the time of the survey was at pre-pandemic levels. Having said that, it is worth mentioning that about a fourth stated that since the pandemic started their work satisfaction and work enthusiasm decreased.

Two years into the pandemic, overall, respondents appeared to be satisfied with their relationships with their work colleagues. Indeed, about four fifths claimed that they were supported by their colleagues. This is quite remarkable considering the social strains created by the pandemic. Normal interactions were greatly disrupted, especially during the first stages of the pandemic. For example, F4M recounted how the pandemic started during a period of organisational reform which led to a recent growth in the number of workers. He said that he was only able to meet his new colleagues nine months after they were recruited.

F2M, who worked in the armed forces, highlighted the direct link between lack of social interaction and stress. He described how during the previous two years, no social events were carried out at work that could de-stress the work environment. The sergeant's mess (canteen) was closed for two years. According to him, such gathering places served different purposes, including that of learning the tricks of the trade in an informal environment. The pandemic broke such networking activities: *"the traditions were locked in a locker and they haven't been out of there for two years... and it affected us, it affected us a lot"*. He was anticipating that the situation would soon return to normal: *"hopefully we shall reintroduce it, leading to the previous type of community cohesion"*.

The pandemic created apprehension of meeting people at work. F5M admitted that: *"we were living a bit of a surreal life, like we were afraid of people, of each other"*. The majority of respondents stated that tension among colleagues increased since the pandemic started. In relation to this, F10M said: *"I think the biggest stress [was] what other people were doing, what your partner was doing, concern about where he was going [outside working hours]. As there were people who would tell you: 'Because I went there today, because I got bored [staying inside]'. As I have a family at home. But if this young man or women went out to drink, even though there weren't [bars] open, they would still find some place to go. And this man would tell me, 'I don't care'"*. Some workers also experienced apprehension when they had to work with different workers due to the changing work schedules. F7M, a health carer, admitted that it was tougher when he had to mix with staff from other wards that he normally did not work with, as in his words: *"obviously, everyone prefers to work with one's team"*.

The majority of survey respondents were also satisfied with the support received from their manager since the start of the pandemic. But a significant third were either unsure or believed that their manager did not support them. The latter often held that they were not treated fairly. A myriad reasons could have led to feelings of injustice, some of which might have been

justified while others might not. Perceived unfairness over who was given the opportunity to do telework (discussed earlier) was one of the causes mentioned. Research participants also mentioned perceived unfairness over extra work received when one was vaccinated compared to those who were not. For example, F2M expressed himself against some of his workplace rules: *"certain rules... [are unfair]. By contributing [socially, by taking the vaccine] I end up at a disadvantage. Those who don't want to be vaccinated, don't do anything, [they just] relax"*.

The majority of survey respondents stated that dealing with clients became more stressful during the pandemic. F2M said that he and his co-workers were subjected to more verbal abuse over the previous two years. He saw a link between the increased interaction with clients on telephone, through emails and Facebook, and the increase of abusive behaviour. Another participant, F5M, believed that the stress of lockdown could have accentuated clients' difficult behaviours. He said that such negative behaviour would spill onto workers and affect their relations at work: *"these things result in stress... Sometimes this ends up with workers behaving rudely to each other"*.

Survey results show that positive work relations are generally correlated to job satisfaction and job enthusiasm, while being negatively related to work stress.

5.1.4 Occupational health and safety (OHS)

The workers' OHS attitudes in relation to the pandemic evolved considerably during the course of two years. At first there was a deep and pervasive fear of the unknown, in the words of F7M: *"having this new situation, totally new, nobody knows anything, nobody knows what will or will not happen... there was no knowledge about it"*. There was not only personal fear of getting infected, but also fear of infecting one's family or one's work colleagues. F4M described his feelings when he ended up in quarantine, having been the first to test positive in his office: *"I started worrying about my colleagues, that they would all end up positive because of me"*.

Two years from the start of the pandemic, most survey respondents still believed to be at risk of getting Covid-19 at work. And the majority of respondents still felt little control over whether they got infected at work. F3F, who worked in banking and finance, described this situation aptly: *"it is difficult in meeting rooms to control clients who sometimes wish to take masks off. You need to be careful where clients touch etc. Then, when working in back office, six workers work in same office. She doesn't stay with mask all the time... It is easy to get Covid if someone has it at work. We don't have system for clients to be served online (to sign papers online, authorize certain things etc)"*. On the fear of returning to work after the pandemic emergency subsided, I15F spoke about the fear that: *"our offices do not have outside windows, the air is filtered. So that kind of heightened the concern that air is being recycled... but I mean it's either that or the pollution outside"*.

However, their fear appeared to have declined considerably. There seemed to be an emerging resignation and/or acceptance of such risks. According to F10M: *"we have to accept it... you need to live with it"*. Perhaps this change in attitude was based on the fatigue of the prolonged crisis management period, and the perception that the disease became less harmful than it originally was. The latter perspective was summarized by F11M, when he said: *"the thing is, we are for example seven in this room; Can anyone of us vouch that we are not infected with Covid? But let's say the symptoms are not so severe [now]"*.

Some workers indicated hesitation in their steps towards normality. F10M admitted that: *"you always remain anxious, but not as much as before. Even, let's say, if someone comes to the workplace, you start getting somewhat scared, you still get a little anxious. But this [anxiety] has now decreased"*. On the other hand, some workers were more forceful in their quest to return to normality. Perhaps out of frustration, RP asserted: *"I work in a hospital and we don't do these things [referring to 'excessive' cleaning, etc.], you have to go with the flow... otherwise you go crazy"*. Some workers even transitioned back to normal routine with a sense of rebellion. F1F, who felt that she was forced to take vaccine as an educator, stated: *"I shouldn't remain afraid of this or the other... I am sorry... but we need to continue living because life is already short enough... if I was meant to get ill, it will happen anyway... no more vaccines for me ... I don't want anything more"*.

This gap in readiness to get back to 'normality' and what constitutes such normality had the potential of creating friction among employees. On the one hand, there were individuals who decided to reduce health and safety efforts and seemingly viewed those who did not with some contempt. For example, F10M stated that: *"there are those who still do it... when the shift changes, there are those who enter 15 minutes before, cleaning [the desk] and acting nonsense"*. On the other hand, there were those who felt that not all workers were doing their duty with regards to the pandemic. For example, F2M spoke about the difficulties that he faced due to co-workers in the army who did not believe in the pandemic, in vaccines and so on.

Interestingly, despite the trend of diminished concern about getting the Covid-19 virus, there was still considerable agreement among survey respondents about the concern of infecting their loved ones through work exposure. In this regard, F6M admitted his anxiety of being required to have contact with clients: *"I have three children and a wife at home, if I get infected, if I don't have a separate place to live, they will end up... Whether or not you like it, you think about these things"*.

In general, the survey respondents had a high regard of their management's actions to reduce OHS risks brought about by the pandemic. Most respondents stated that they had enough equipment and procedures to protect themselves against Covid-19. Interviewees and focus group participants mentioned a variety of measures adopted during the peak of the pandemic, such as: more and deeper cleaning, fumigation, use of sanitizers, use of masks and visors, temperature checks, ventilation, skeleton staff, working on roster basis, no interaction between workers in different offices (*"we stayed as much as possible in the same bubble"*), perspex barriers, removal of chairs from canteens (or canteen closures), no handshakes, online meetings and so on. I15F said that the HR department provided workers with a Covid-19 policy that explained the procedures in case of sickness and so on. There was a consensus among many participants that the measures taken were both necessary and proportional, or as F11M put it: *"they were enough and they were good"*. Some of these measures, in particular the less disruptive ones, remained in place two years in the pandemic.

Most of the survey respondents were satisfied with the training they received on how to reduce chances of getting infected, though a substantial minority (over a fourth) disagreed. The majority of respondents stated that their management communicated properly on issues relating to Covid-19. I6F, who used to work in the public sector during the peak of the pandemic mentioned that: *"we had a Health and Safety Officer at work and regular meetings were set up, updates were communicated via email as well"*. One should note that while

communication appeared relatively good, in some cases as mentioned elsewhere, the quantity of communication increased (due to more memos, emails being issued), the relevance of the communication diminished, and the wrong means of communication was used.

Some interviewees pointed out the important role of their trade union in improving their OHS, especially when management was not cooperative. For example, I2F mentioned the extensive intervention of the union during this period, among others to stop the use of punching clock due to contagion risks. I2F, a shop steward, stated that: *“we were fighting for what was rightfully ours... for our rights”*. Similarly, I7M noted the intervention of his union to reduce OHS risks in his postal delivery job. I13F also praised her trade union for the guidance and support it provided: *“there were times when I didn’t feel safe. But we had the trade union issuing directives, you know?”*.

Despite the above anecdotes which reflect a section of survey respondents who were not convinced about their management’s benevolent intentions, the majority of respondents believed that their managers cared about their well-being. Participants felt relatively well supported by their superiors. Additionally, some participants mentioned ‘extra’ help provided by their management. For example, F11M pointed out that at Mater Dei hospital there was a psychologist available for members of staff, while for the other government departments there was a section dedicated to mental health. F11M added that while the services existed, not everyone knew about them.

- In relation to foreigners

The number of foreign workers increased exponentially over the decade leading to the pandemic. This phenomenon was not accompanied by sufficient social and work integration of these workers (Debono & Vassallo, 2019). The pandemic appears to have increased the friction between Maltese and foreign workers, especially TNCs, who several focus group participants felt they not only carried more risk of infection, but also did not care about Covid-19 safety measures.

F8M, a health carer who worked in a hospital, explained that foreigners: *“are at greater risk since some of them total 10 people living in the same apartment. Since they are afraid of losing their job, these foreigners would also come to work when sick, even when sick with influenza”*. According to F8M, foreigners didn’t cooperate on health and safety: *“black foreigners have never paid any attention. We tell them [in vain] to keep their distance... when you ask most Indians [to take their temperature?] and they reply “yes, yes, yes”, and just stare at you”*.

F2M also remarked with frustration on the perceived cultural difference and egoism of foreigners: *“there are groups of very arrogant migrant workers in Malta... It’s a cultural thing... So I take care and you don’t care. Don’t forget the existing fear that if you don’t care and get me sick, I have a family at home. Your family is [living] cozy cozy in your country. So people get angry”*. Similar remarks were uttered by other participants. For example, F5M asserted that: *“if you are in a country, you have to respect the culture of that country”*, while F1F said: *“we are too accepting”*. These types of remarks were very common during the focus groups and reflected an ‘us versus them’ mentality that might truly include real cultural challenges but was also infused with prejudice.

5.1.5 Life outside work

The pandemic not only affected the workplace, but also destabilized workers' personal lives. It is of concern that close to 40% of respondents felt that their level of happiness and/or mental health got worse since the pandemic started. Some participants were still suffering from the trauma they endured during the lock down period and/or quarantine/s they experienced perhaps even in more recent times. Focus group participants described being locked at home as *"house arrest"*. F11M vividly remembered being in quarantine just two weeks before the focus group: *"I got crazy at home, literally, meaning the tension I had because I was inside...oh!"*.

While, as discussed earlier, the large majority of survey respondents affirmed to be earning similar salaries to pre-pandemic levels, over a fourth acknowledged that their family finances got worse. The latter were more likely to work in specific industries in the private sector, such as manufacturing and tourism. While some sectors might have still been paying lower salaries than pre-Covid-19, other reasons might have also been affecting family finances. For example, families might have still been suffering from the lost income suffered during the peak of the pandemic. At some point, around 80,000 workers were receiving the government Covid Wage Supplement instead of their wage, which often amounted to much less than they would normally earn. This supplement continued to be disbursed well into 2022 in particular sectors. Some participants who did not lose their wages as they as they were guaranteed by government, mentioned the loss of allowances and other types of income, even sometimes from part-time jobs in the private sector. Besides, family finances sometimes got worse as partners or other family members lost their jobs or experienced a reduction in their incomes. For example, F5M, who worked in a government authority, said that he did not personally lose any income in the pandemic, but his son who still lived with him, lost his part-time job in an English language school, thus affecting the overall family income.

Over a third of the survey respondents stated that their physical health got worse since the pandemic started. While the survey indicated a small relation between age and physical health (as older age results in a gradual deterioration of health), this was not statistically significant. On the other hand, increased work-related stress since the start of the pandemic was strongly correlated both with lowered mental and physical health. Some participants also admitted to gaining weight during the previous two years, which may have contributed to a deterioration of their health.

Overall, survey respondents stated that their family relations stayed similar to pre-pandemic levels. Family bonds, so important in the Maltese culture, appeared to have endured well enough the challenges posed by Covid-19. In some cases, the pandemic necessitated even more interaction with particular relatives, such as when workers needed to assist aging parents. For example, F4M stated: *"I had to take care of my parents... I had to try to find time, even during my work, to do their errands"*. Despite the above, survey results indicate that one should not take relationships for granted, as they require effort and communication that was strained in the pandemic. Indeed, over a quarter of the respondents felt that their relations with friends got worse since the pandemic started. It is unclear whether the situation will improve as society gradually returns to normal dynamics.

While this study focused mostly on the challenges produced by the pandemic, research participants mentioned several positive consequences of the pandemic, such as the benefits of new forms of working and reduced traffic. Some workers also profited from the movement

towards online education and training. For example, F4M and I7M recounted that during this period, they managed to do online courses, which have increased in number and are advertised more than before.

5.2 Focus on specific social groups

5.2.1 Women workers

Despite some literature indicating the increased adverse effects of the pandemic on female workers (e.g. Peck, 2021; The Consultative Council for Women's Rights, 2020), the female participants in this study by and large experienced similar outcomes to male participants, with some differences in either direction. A probable influence on the results was the fact that almost all participants in this study were trade union members, thus enjoying a certain level of protection irrespective of their gender. Results also indicated that motherhood changed the work experiences and attitudes of the female participants in this study.

In line with EU findings (Eurostat, 2022), women, especially mothers, appeared to have experienced greater stability in their employment. Female participants were significantly less likely than men to report lowered levels of job security. Mothers were less likely than other social groups to consider leaving their job due to pandemic. Besides, mothers were also less likely to believe that the pandemic had long-term effects on their career. The higher concentration of women in essential services (such as healthcare) and services that were least disturbed by the pandemic (such as finance) might have affected this finding.

Since the pandemic started, women, especially mothers, were more likely to work from home when compared to men. These results might have been influenced by their greater propensity to work in services sectors and less in manufacturing. But women also appeared to have made a greater effort to work from home, especially when schools and child-minding services were not running properly. I11F, a social work professional, vividly explained this situation: *“we wanted to be home; we had no other choice. The kids were at home. I didn't know what else to do. I couldn't take them to my mum due to covid”*. At the same time, mothers were less likely to change the time when they work during the pandemic. This might be due to child and other family responsibilities that would have made it harder for them to alter their work schedules.

Overall, women tended to feel more productive than men when WFH. Due to their greater caring responsibilities outside work, female participants may value more the efficiency created when avoiding travel time and other time loss related to working from the office. I15F, a mother who works on reduced hours as a senior officer explained that *“sometimes it can get noisy in an open plan office, so I was appreciating the fact [that] in the quiet hours in which my son would not be with me, you can hone in on something and get quality work done in less time basically. You don't have to struggle to get it done”*.

While international research indicated the greater propensity for working women to experience stress and anxiety during the pandemic (e.g. Jacques-Aviñó et al., 2022; Muñoz-Muñoz et al., 2022), this study did not indicate significant gender differences on this front. At the same time, some interviewees revealed the pressure that mothers faced when working at home. I11F, stated that while WFH *“was convenient due to the flexibility [offered] since we had children at home during that period, and for health reasons it was a priority to be home”*, she was under greater pressure than usual, as *“management expects you're available*

24 hours”. Reflecting about her experience during the lock down period, I11F said: *“I changed the way I work. I had my children [attending school] online. If I’m with them [during certain times], I cannot work at the same time. So sometimes I also worked on Saturdays, or evenings. I used to change my working times. Or late in the afternoon. Those who like me had children struggled with this. For those who don’t have kids it was different. For us, for those who have children, we were affected in a worse manner by the pandemic... We had to handle everything all at once! The kids, their education, work, everyone’s mental health, ours, the kids”*. I15F similarly narrated the difficulties of juggling work and caring responsibilities when her son couldn’t go to school: *“kids are kids, they want constant attention. So that was a bit tough. As such what this meant was that I had to be more flexible on my part to shuffle around the hours, and I work when my son is asleep, basically, and during this time maybe you had more stress, because of added tiredness, and you need to find a slot to focus, and a time to focus. You either get tired because you need to find a quiet time which is when he’s asleep, which is at night, when you should be asleep too, or else the other way round, you keep on trying to focus while he’s disturbing you and that’s an added stress”*.

The current study also indicated the importance for women (and men) to be proactive in combating mental health challenges. For example, in line with Felice et al. (2020), some female participants mentioned seeking professional psychological help in difficult time. I11F explained her efforts to stay mentally healthy during the peak of the pandemic: *“you need to make an effort to safeguard your mental health. I used to try and go walking [regularly], meditate, doing Pilates at home. I used to try and do all this. I used to take my kids near the sea, to take in some fresh air [...] I also attended counselling offered by my place of work”*.

The need of support at work, especially from superiors, is an important theme that emerged throughout the interviews. Some mothers felt better understood and supported when their superiors were also mothers, passing through similar circumstances as their own. In the words of I15F: *“I got understanding from my bosses because they are mothers as well... so they were going through the same struggle, and we could understand each other... That was helpful, very helpful, sharing the worries and everything, but then if I had to compare with my male colleagues who don’t even have small kids, because that’s a big difference, the challenges I assume would be different. All my colleagues who have small kids all went through the same process of them [the kids] needing constant attention or else just lump them in front of the screen which you feel guilty of doing afterward, but which is the only solution”*.

Some female participants, especially young ones without child responsibilities, lowered their stress levels during the pandemic. For example, I3F stated that during the lock down period: *“my mental health actually improved. Since I was still a student at the time, an apprentice, and also working 3 jobs, I had more time for myself, I calmed down [when I had to remain at home], even my attitude, for me it was beneficial, even now, I panic less now after going through that tense period [...] thanks to the pandemic I also started to [physically] train again, I hadn’t trained in ages! So it really affected me positively, since I spent a couple of months at home, even with my family, I spent more time with them [...] it affected me so positively, it worked wonders!”*.

5.2.2 Young workers

In line with foreign research (e.g. Churchill, 2021; Hlasny & AlAzzawi, 2022), this study indicated a considerable level of instability in the employment of young persons during the

pandemic. Young workers were less satisfied with the working conditions in their job when compared to older workers, and nearly a third of them changed job since the pandemic started. As expected, the ties of young workers to their jobs tended not to be as strong as those of older persons. At a young age, individuals would be experimenting with jobs and not necessarily viewing them as a long-term investment. I14F, a young woman working part-time while pursuing further studies admitted: *“I am going to be completely candid and honest and say that I really didn’t care about my job”*.

Young workers were more likely than older workers to experience a decrease in working hours. Their working time and their work tasks were more likely to have changed when compared to older workers. Changing responsibilities at times led to feelings of marginalisation, with the consequential weakening of the bond between the worker and the organisation. I14F stated that: *“we were four in the office, and I was the youngest, with the least number of working hours and the least responsibilities... So they gave all the normal day-to-day tasks they gave to them. I was given the extra stuff that I could do on my own. I wasn’t upset about it. I enjoyed it. Like I said, I wasn’t happy at work, so the less interaction with others and the least queries, the better for me”*. I14F expanded on the tasks she was given during the early period of the pandemic: *“I was given random tasks basically, tasks that I could do on my own, tasks that don’t require specific access and I just kind of did my thing”*.

Some young persons may have still been living with their parents. Interviews revealed how during the pandemic, their personal income was affected when other family members lost their jobs. I9F stated that: *“on a personal level mine [my situation] was better, however... some family members lost their job, so they became dependent on us”*. Similarly, I3F said: *“my father, who is now a pensioner, used to work in catering at the time, so he was negatively affected. We felt a difference. On the other hand, since we were not going out, and spending money, we managed”*.

The theme of experience was a recurring one during interviews with young persons. Work-related difficulties created by low levels of experience were evident in some interviews. For example, I6F stated that *“before the pandemic started, my job mostly involved going into meetings to take minutes. I had recently started this job so it was easier for me to be physically there since I could ask questions etc. Then after 3 months on the job we shifted to working from home.... The difficulties were further compounded by practical issues for example if my [internet] connection was lost, I would miss out on what was said during the meeting. And this meant that I would follow-up with them later to check what was said”*. Low levels of experience were also obvious in the case of I9F who stated that *“having to deal with multiple demands from colleagues, being unsure on whom to assist first, having so many deadlines at the same time... you’re constantly doing stuff for others, it was a stressful environment... I didn’t always have the support I required, I wish the situation was better, that another colleague would have joined me at the office”*. The other side of the coin in relation to the challenges created by low levels of experience is that the pandemic forced some young persons to learn more by taking on more work responsibilities than they ever had before. I9F said: *“you feel responsible, because [if you don’t manage everything] you’re affecting the pace at which they [her colleagues] carry out their work. Cause they require something, and only you can provide it”*.

Young workers often undergo more supervision than older ones. In some instances, as in the case of I5M, this creates considerable pressure, verging on the “mental exhaustion”. Thus,

having to work from home relieved him from such burden: *“there was less pressure than if I had my boss in the same room with me”*. He further explained that when working at the office: *“there is always that aspect that your boss is nearby, if something happens you need to confront it face to face, [but when you are WFH] things occur via emails or phone calls. So, you can say that less interaction in a way decreased stress levels”*. I5M, as many young persons, valued independence or freedom, and felt that that his boss was suffocating him before he started WFH. The value of freedom, in the form of flexibility, was also highlighted by I14F who, when WFH during the early days of the pandemic was better able to combine working time with her studies.

There are indications that young persons struggled with organisational communication when they had to work from home. Insufficient experience appears to be a major reason for this. For example, I6F who changed jobs during the pandemic, felt more stressed to work from home in the new job. She disclosed that while in face-to-face situations she wouldn't think twice about asking something, it was harder for her to do so online. She found it more difficult to initiate and sustain communication. At first, she *“just felt like giving up... but then, you get used to this new way of working. But when we reverted back to working at the office, I felt more comfortable, better”*. Similarly, I8M, a remote worker in a gaming company mentioned that having to conduct online meetings with the 14-member team he was in charge of was: *“the most difficult aspect”* of WFH. Being an introvert might have increased this challenge. I15F, a senior officer also mentioned the challenges of maintaining effective communication with junior staff when WFH. She said that with the senior staff: *“there was continuous communication there and we were working, that was fine. But with junior staff it's more difficult cause they are still trying to run themselves in the process, to determine how the system works. Unfortunately, our work is a bit of a touch and go thing, nothing is very settled, even though working procedures are in place there's a lot of room for interpretation, and so I think for junior stuff, even for us to monitor whether they are actually doing the work or doing something else is a bit difficult”*.

I9F admitted the difficulties of having to work alone: *“from an office with 10 workers I ended up the only one at the office. ... It was difficult, even the environment, before there were all those people, and all of a sudden, you're alone... the day seems longer, it's honestly sad to work all those hours in an office on your own. It was really sad”*. Lack of interaction with colleagues was mentioned by I5M as a major reason for wishing to return to work: *“there were downsides as well, decreased interaction with others, your friends at work, you don't get out of the house... if I had to make a choice, I prefer working from the office”*. Such findings are in line with other research indicating the negative impact of the pandemic on young persons' social relations (e.g. Azzopardi & Caruso, 2022). During lockdown, some young persons managed to continue socialising with their work colleagues virtually. I8M said: *“one thing that really helped was the virtual meet ups. [Before the pandemic] on Friday we used to go for after work drinks. Since this was no longer possible, we did the same thing from home on a virtual call. At first, we thought it might not make sense, but it helped a lot. Even just sharing a joke, seeing a smile on people's face, it helped a lot”*.

The interviewed young persons were not particularly stressed by the potential risk of getting infected themselves, though they were still worried about transmitting the virus to their relatives. In the words of I7M: *“that was the only issue [of concern]. Since I'm young... I was not worried about myself but I was worried for my parents”*. Similarly, I3F was not concerned for herself but rather for her vulnerable mother. Being healthier and with fewer

responsibilities than older persons also meant that some young persons ended up taking extra work burdens to make up for those who could not go to the office.

Despite the greater turbulence that the pandemic created in their working lives, survey findings revealed that young persons were more likely than older ones to believe that the pandemic had positive long-term effects on their careers. It provided some of them with new experiences that they might otherwise not have had, as in the case of I9F, who was left to work alone in an office that previous had 10 persons. The fact that she was exposed to other colleagues' work during this time was a positive aspect for her career as she learned a lot. Some other young persons were proactive in their own self-development. I7M, for example, said: *"since we were in lockdown, I took the opportunity to start studying again, to improve my skills. So, from that aspect it was positive although careerwise, workwise it did not have an effect"*.

5.2.3 Persons with Disability (PWD)

The survey indicated the participating PWD's increased work stress levels during the pandemic. For instance, they felt that dealing with work clients became more stressful. I2F pointed out that during the pandemic workplaces gave considerable attention to physical health but gave much less importance to mental health. While this affected all groups of workers, it must have been particularly difficult for some PWD. The rise of stress among PWD during the pandemic is well-documented (e.g. Mitra, 2021). Having said that, not all PWD experienced heightened levels of stress. Interviewee I1F, an educator said that during the lock down period: *"from a mental perspective I felt better, even from a physical perspective, it was much less tiring"*.

There is some evidence that the pandemic sometimes affected the family income of PWD more than that of other persons, even in cases where they did not lose their jobs. F8M acknowledged that during three months in the pandemic when he was not reporting to work due to his vulnerability, he continued receiving his basic pay but lost his allowances.

Most of the surveyed PWD thought that they did not receive adequate pandemic-related health and safety training. Their vulnerabilities may have heightened their fears and needs. Research indicates that PWD suffer from insufficient training in general (Ernst & Young, 2020). PWD have at times experienced greater difficulties due to the government's and employers' pandemic response than other persons. F2M expressed his frustration on the enforcement of mask wearing, especially for persons with asthma: *"we are still wearing masks. Army officers already have to wear helmet, webbing, bullet-proof, already 15-20 kilos plus mask in sun. And we have been going on like this for two years... and there is a high rate of persons suffering from asthma... even in my section... it is difficult [for them]... How much can a person endure?"*.

This study highlighted the central theme of isolation felt by PWD during the pandemic, a notion that has been highlighted in other research (e.g. Camilleri et al., 2021). All interviewees with disabilities highlighted such challenge. I4M stressed his sense of isolation on WFH: *"we were a tightly knit team, so I missed the contact with colleagues at the place of work. This was the biggest disadvantage"*. To counteract this, I4M used to call his colleagues during the evening for a chat. On the same topic, I10M stated that when WFH: *"I missed the croissants, and the good coffee at work, until I bought a coffee machine!"*. I10M lived alone and he *"missed the atmosphere at work, the daily communication with colleagues"* and

believed that working in a hybrid way would be ideal for him. Similarly, I1F another PWD who worked in education also believed that hybrid work would be the ideal way forward.

The importance of social support is another major theme emerging in relation to PWD. The survey revealed that several of the participating PWD did not receive enough support from their work colleagues. Sometimes, insufficient support from superiors was particularly problematic. Interviewee I4M, who used to work in an English language school during the pandemic, spoke about his difficulties in retaining his employment when he sensed lack of support. When the school reopened after having been closed due to the pandemic, he started being pressured to revert back to in-person teaching through subtle threats that if he did not, he would lose the government wage supplement. This frustrated him: *“I am not going to risk my health for 400EUR a month”*. He managed to convince management to offer him the online teaching option, though the school eventually closed down for good. Another interviewee, I1F said that while PWD who had indefinite contracts had a certain level of job security, she knew several cases of PWD who were on a definite contract and who ended up jobless since the employer did not provide ‘reasonable accommodations’ or because they could not afford to pay for internet. On the other hand, F8M praised the support that he received from his trade union when he had to stop reporting to work for a number of months due to his vulnerable status. When he returned to work, he was given light duties (such as driving and running errands) in order to accommodate his health problem.

The survey indicated the participating PWD’s decreased physical health during the pandemic. The particularly negative effects of the interruptions to the daily routines of PDW has already been documented in previous research (e.g. Camilleri et al., 2021).

Some interesting insights emerged with regards to WFH. I1F, an educator with mobility issues stated that: *“since I am a person with a disability, working from home was more comfortable for me. It takes me quite a long time to get ready to commute, so this one of the positives of the situation. You use the time saved to do other things, other work”*. She spoke about the extra hurdles that she faced in commuting: *“in addition to factoring in the time for the journey, I also need to factor in the time required for parking. I cannot just park anywhere due to my condition, and these practicalities I need to factor in translate into more time used and added stress”*. So not commuting, enabled her to obtain a better work-life balance with more time for hobbies and so on. Similarly I10M said that not having to commute during the pandemic made a huge positive difference to his quality of life, as it was less taxing from a physical perspective.

While no PWD reported that the pandemic had positive long-term effects on their career, half of them believed that it had negative effects. The reasons for this are unknown. Having said that, none of the PWD thought about leaving their job due to the pandemic, which might be an indication that they are in safe jobs, but might also be due to perceived lack of better alternatives. It is also worth noting that unlike the survey respondents, I1F stated that the pandemic helped her career as *“the time I saved [from not having to commute] was put to good use for academic research and publishing”*.

5.2.4 Atypical workers

The survey revealed few significant differences between atypical workers and typical ones. Besides, such differences are not always in the expected direction. Trade union membership

may have reduced many of the disadvantages that research normally documents about atypical workers.

Thus, for example, atypical workers who participated in the survey appear to have been advantaged with regards to some of the pandemic-related health and safety measures at work. In contrast to foreign research (e.g. Gunn et al., 2022), they were more likely to state that they had enough equipment and procedures to protect themselves against Covid-19 when compared to other workers. They were also more likely to feel that their management communicated properly on issues relating to Covid-19. One could argue that this might be at least partly due to the lower expectations of atypical workers.

On the other hand, atypical workers' job stability might have been affected more by the pandemic when compared to other workers. Indeed, the atypical workers who participated in the study were more likely to have changed their job due to the pandemic. In relation to this finding, an interviewee, I3F, who worked on a part-time basis in a shop that experienced a tough time during the pandemic and has since closed, admitted that: *“since I am a part-timer at the shop, I do not have as many rights as full-timers. This led to a reduction in my earnings, even the bonus was so reduced”* for a period of time.

Some interviewees also mentioned that they knew of atypical workers who were made redundant during the pandemic. I7M, who worked on an indefinite contract in the postal delivery service, revealed that while his job was secure, workers employed with a contractor were laid off, and those on indefinite contracts like him started doing the work that was previously done by the contracted workers. Similarly, I1F an educator with disability knew of several PWD on definite contracts who lost their jobs during the pandemic as the employer did not provide them with adequate support. I4M, who lost his part time job when his employer closed down the school where he worked recounted that he managed to find alternative employment on a self-employed basis, but this resulted in lower earnings that are not commensurate to his lifestyle.

Knowledge and experience counteracted potential feelings of precariousness among some contract workers. For example, I13F, an educator, never felt that her job was insecure since she was *“very much needed”*. Her long teaching experience taught her how to handle the students and their behaviour, *“unlike new graduates”*. She said that her headmistress relied heavily on her experience, especially *“to provide order in class”*, and this gave her leverage in the employment relationship.

The surveyed atypical workers appeared to enjoy less flexibility than other workers during the pandemic. For example, they were less likely to have worked from home. One reason for this could be related to the type of work they happened to do. But the interviewees shed light on the fact that atypical workers might not be prioritised in the allocation of limited resources. For instance, I14F, a part-time clerical worker stated that when the pandemic started and she shifted to WFH: *“I needed to work using my own supplies... this was basically due to lack of resources, this was the main reason. The situation was so unexpected and the institution was already struggling to assist those who are in need throughout the year, both students as well as staff members who were remote working due to having children. So, the situation was already dire then [before the pandemic], even more so when it happened that everyone needed assistance”*. I14F further explained: *“I remember a particular week when I didn't only need to use my laptop but also my phone, because we had to make several calls, and we needed to use our mobiles. We had to make our mobiles private*

and use our personal phones, and we weren't happy about this... eventually we received a small top up to our salary as compensation for costs incurred".

Atypical workers who worked from home were also less likely to state that they had the necessary knowledge and skills to work effectively. This is in line with research indicating that employers often overlook atypical workers with regards to training and development (Hamouche & Chabani, 2021).

CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study sought to shed light on the developing effects of the pandemic on workers in Malta, with a special emphasis on women, young persons, PWD and atypical workers. It documented the challenges faced by workers in their quest to return to normality after a prolonged period of acute restrictions, changes and stress. Work attitudes and experiences were often shared among the different groups of workers.

However the study also highlighted several particular difficulties experienced by the examined social groups. While the same individuals may have been suffering from multiple forms of disadvantage on the basis of personal and social characteristics such as gender, age, disability, and type of work contract, an attempt was made to examine idiosyncratic outcomes of each of the four groups separately in order to simplify the analysis.

While the reported attitudes and experiences of working women were largely similar to those of men, some divergences appeared to favour women while others favoured men. Women were more likely to have worked from home during the pandemic and felt more productive doing so. Motherhood was found to be a potentially more crucial characteristic than gender in predicting work outcomes. Mothers reported greater stability in their employment than the other participants. The employment of young persons was characterised by greater turbulence than that of older persons. Their low levels of work experience proved particularly challenging during the pandemic. PWD appeared to have faced worse work-related outcomes than the other groups of interest, suffering among others from insufficient support, isolation, and deteriorating physical health. Atypical workers largely sustained similar working conditions as other workers, with some differences not in the expected direction. Having said that, members of this group enjoyed less flexibility to work from home and were more likely to lose or change jobs during the pandemic.

The following are a number of recommendations on how to manage the changes brought about by Covid-19, based on the findings of this study. The recommendations may assist trade unions to better target their interventions, thereby increasing their relevance and impact on collective bargaining and social dialogue.

- **Improve organisational communication**

Rationale: This study indicated considerable potential improvement in organisational communication across places of work in Malta. Improper use of communication results in decreased efficiency, blurred boundaries between work and private life, and stress. There need to be effective organisational communication policies in place. Management and workers need more training on the use of organisational communication, including the proper use of different channels of communication, managing online meetings, maintaining work relations, the right to disconnect and so on. Due to their lack of experience, young persons are among those who would benefit considerably from such training.

- **Facilitate working from home (WFH)**

Rationale: Teleworking in Malta has considerable potential to expand further (CBM, 2021). Its effectiveness varies and depends on factors such as organisational structure, managerial attitudes and skills, professionalism of employees, enabling environment and trust. All these elements need to be strengthened. For example, an awareness campaign with employers may help to reduce resistance towards WFH. Blended work should be

advocated whenever possible. WFH should be made available to all categories of workers, including atypical ones, but special attention should be paid to the needs of mothers.

- **Support workers' mental and physical wellbeing**

Rationale: Lowered levels of psychological and physical health (including gaining weight) are major negative side effects of the pandemic on workers in Malta. Lock downs and quarantines were particularly traumatic for many persons. Negative emotions such as loneliness, fear, learned helplessness, and apathy were commonly reported. The health of some groups of workers, such as PWD, appears to have been disproportionately affected. Better access to psychological support should be provided. Creative ways of providing for the social needs of employees using tech solutions should be explored and implemented.

- **Facilitate relations between Maltese and migrant workers**

Rationale: Many participants harboured negative feelings towards migrants. Such situation appears to be symptomatic of the exponential increase in foreign workers and their insufficient integration in the Maltese society in general and in places of work in particular. The pandemic has increased the friction between Maltese and foreign workers, especially TNCs. Better relations would not only improve work effectiveness but also facilitate working life. Training and other initiatives should be directed towards both Maltese and foreign workers.

- **Better manage workloads**

Rationale: The pandemic altered the workloads and tasks of many workers, leading to greater stress levels and potential productivity problems. Some of the new challenges, like backlogs, may be for a relatively short-lasting period of time, while others deriving from organisational restructuring or operational changes may be more long-lasting and may need more long-term planning and attention.

- **Cater for the long-term career needs of women, mothers, youth, PWD and atypical workers**

Rationale: Organisational changes tend to favour the socially advantaged groups of workers at the cost of the other groups. Organisations' return to normality should not further marginalise workers who might already experience greater challenges than others. Organisations could promote diverse career paths for mothers whose working lives are more restricted due to child responsibilities. The more precarious nature of young workers' employment engagement could be counteracted by greater investments in their training. PWD should be provided with better tailor made support to enable them to give their full potential and integrate more at work. Atypical workers should be treated the same as typical ones, in terms of training, WFH and so on.

- **Strengthen efforts to unionise PWD and atypical workers**

Rationale: The more vulnerable categories of workers and those who are in the more precarious occupations are too often not unionised. Despite the increasing challenges relating to the growing trend of atypical work in Malta especially among TNCs, the atypical workers who took part in this study were often not particularly disadvantaged. This is partly due to the fact that TNCs tend not to be unionised. Similarly, very few PWD could be found to participate in the current study. Out of the already limited number of PWD in employment in Malta, less than a fourth are unionised (Ernst & Young, 2020). Unions need to keep relevant by continuing to represent the changing workforce and support them in their diverse employment contracts and relationships. Unions should

explore the use of innovative ways to reach out to different groups of workers, including social media.

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