

COVID-19 IMPACT

on the Employment Conditions
of Women, Youth, People with
Disabilities, and Atypical Workers

KEY FINDINGS



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Contents

1. Background and Rationale	2
2. General Results	2
3. Specific results about women, youth, persons with disabilities, and atypical workers.	8
4. Recommendations	11
4.1. Working from home (WFH) and organisational communication	11
<i>Work performance and its evaluation</i>	11
<i>Awareness, education and training</i>	11
<i>Communication, meetings and agreements</i>	11
4.2. Intercultural relations at work	12
<i>Shop stewards, specialised workers, and union membership</i>	12
<i>Skills and awareness</i>	12
<i>Laws, regulations and their enforcement</i>	13
4.3. Mental health and physical wellbeing	13
<i>Mental health</i>	13
<i>Physical well-being</i>	13

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The whole report can be accessed from:

<https://gwu.org.mt/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Report-%E2%80%93-COVID-19-Impact-on-Employment-Conditions-1.pdf>

1. Background and Rationale

International research indicates widespread effects of the pandemic on working conditions. The pandemic exposed profound power, economic, and health disparities among different social groups. Women, youth, persons with disabilities (PWDs) and atypical workers tend to experience greater challenges in their working lives when compared to other groups.

This study seeks to shed more light on the development of work-related experiences and attitudes of these four social groups 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.

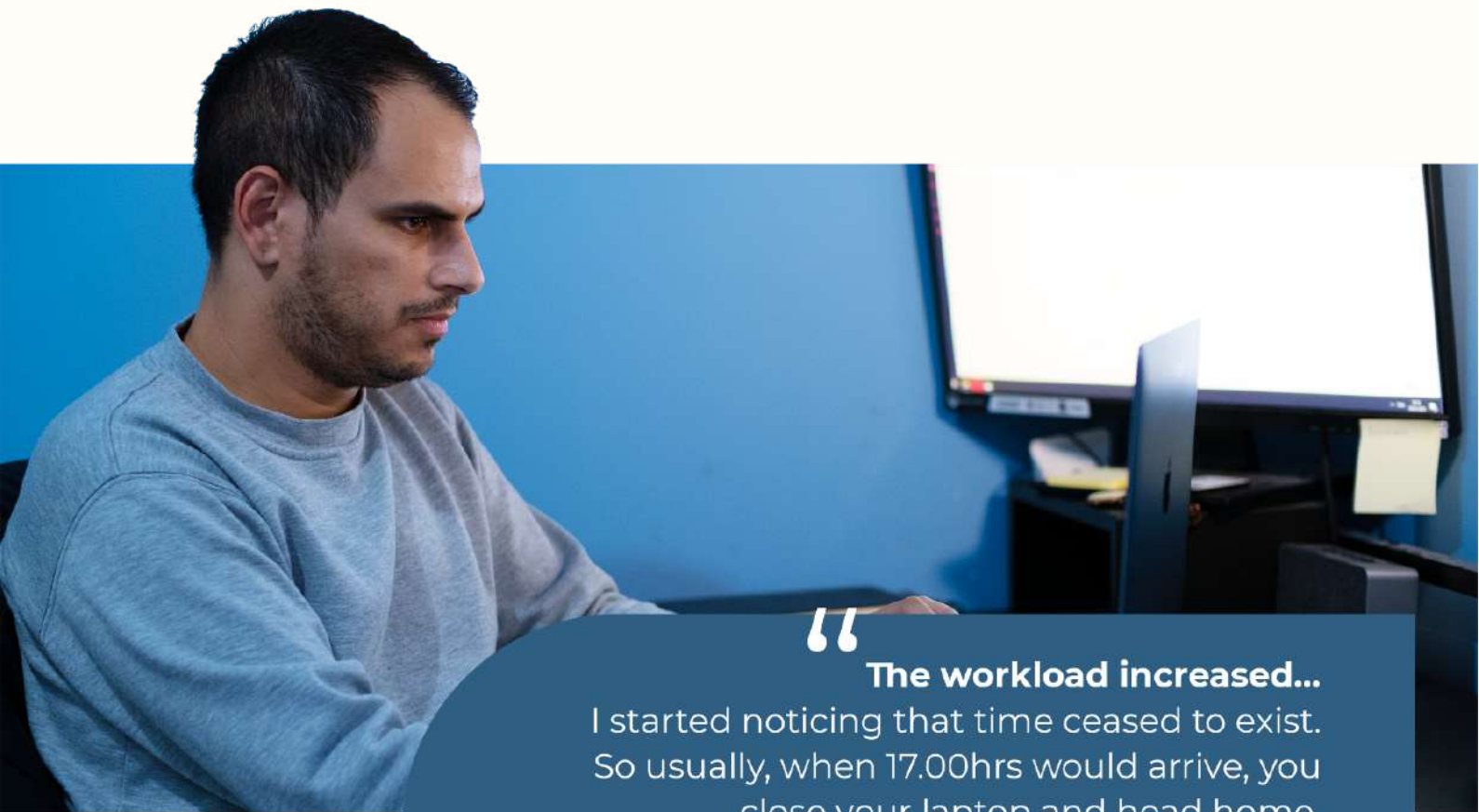
The results of this study were discussed in training seminars during which trade union officials proposed several suggestions to tackle emerging work-related challenges.

2. General Results

Many of the Covid-19 work-related experiences of participants were shared across demographics and other life circumstances. During the initial stages of the pandemic, workers were united by a ubiquitous sense of fear, which over a prolonged period of time led to exhaustion, and an increased 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 use of ICT may have impinged on organisational communication in terms of both quantity and quality.



“

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” **(Participant IBM)**

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 working from home (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%).

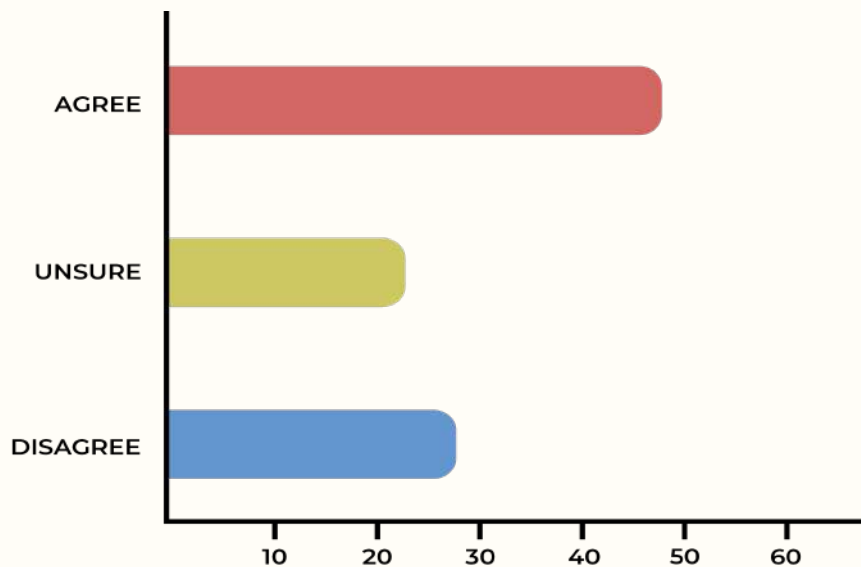


“**For me, being at home in peace and quiet,** rather than in an open plan office means **I can concentrate,** I can close the door, I don't have any distractions” (**Participant I12F**)

Two years into the pandemic, the survey respondents' feelings 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%).

I am currently feeling more stressed at work than before the pandemic started



Most survey respondents thought that their colleagues supported them (78.8%). The majority of respondents were also satisfied with the support received from their managers since the start of the pandemic (66.3%). At the same time, most survey respondents stated that dealing with clients became more stressful (60.8%).

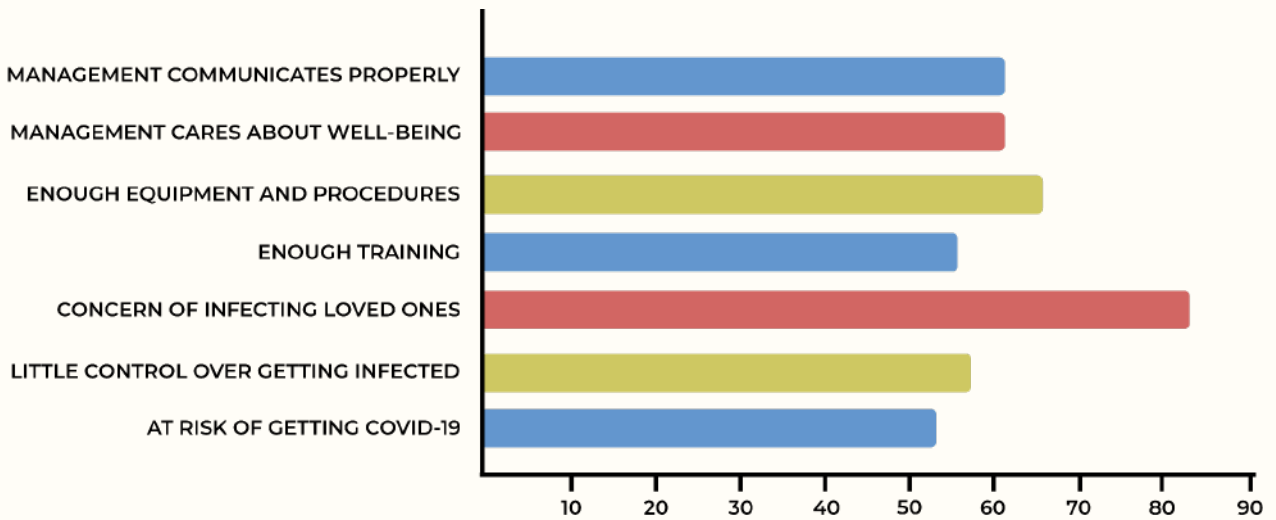
Positive work relations were generally correlated to job satisfaction and job enthusiasm, while being negatively related to work stress.

The workers' Occupational Health and Safety 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%), and 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 focus groups revealed considerable 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.



Occupational Health and Safety regarding Covid-19



Nearly 40% of respondents felt that their level of happiness and/or mental health decreased since the pandemic started. Over a third (35.3%) stated that their physical health got worse. 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 to pre-pandemic levels or improved (71.8% and 12.2% respectively), but a quarter of the respondents (27.5%) felt that their relations with friends got worse.

3. Specific results about women, youth, persons with disabilities, and atypical workers

Women were significantly less likely than men to report lowered levels of job security during the pandemic. Motherhood affected 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, 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.



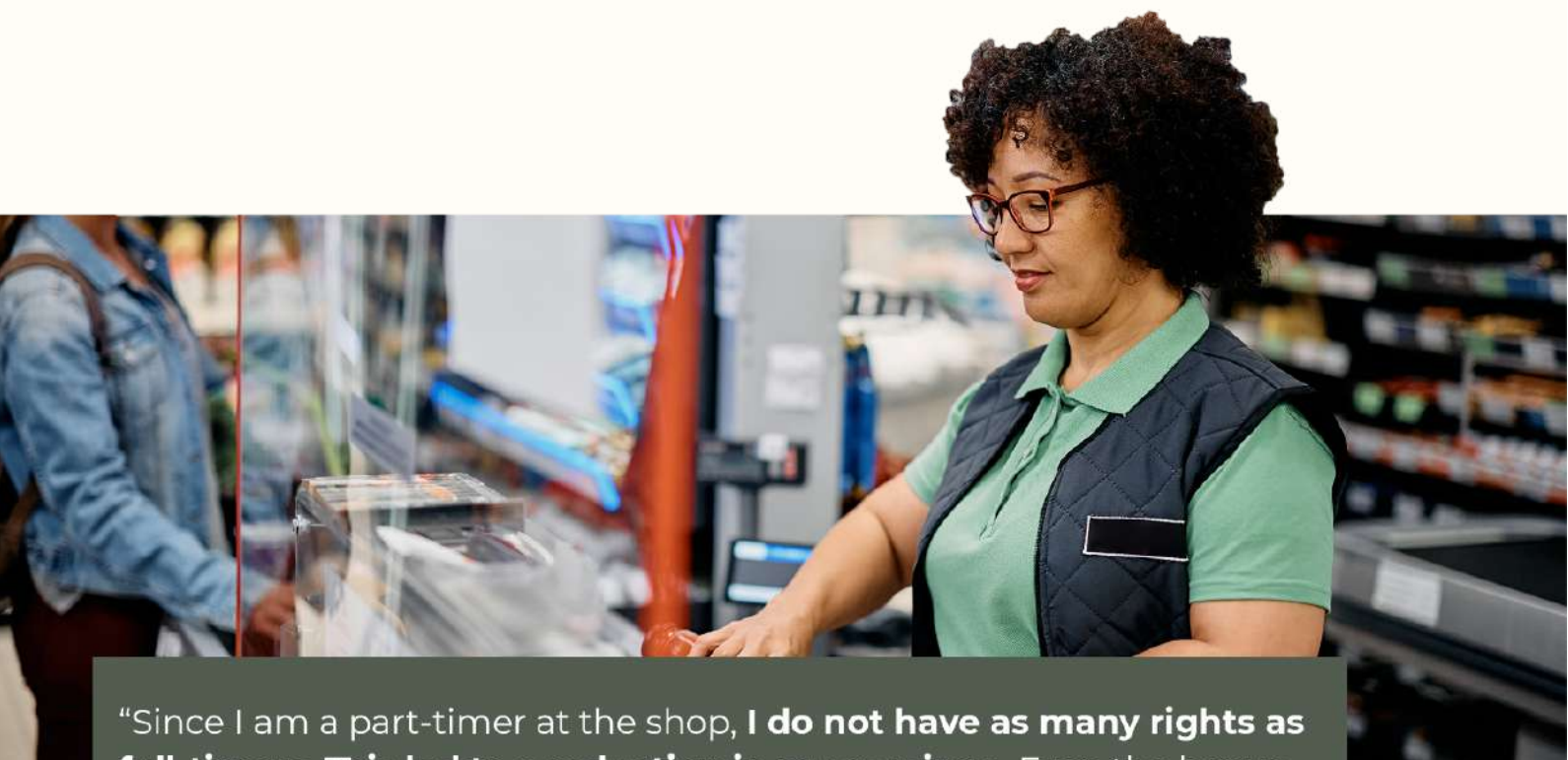
“

I changed the way I work. I had my children attending school online. **If I'm with them, I cannot work at the same time.** So sometimes I also worked on Saturdays, or evenings. I used to change my working times... Those who like me had children struggled with this. For those who don't have kids it was different... **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" (Participant III F)

Young persons were less satisfied with the working conditions in their job when compared to older persons, and nearly a third of them changed job since the pandemic started, though often for reasons unrelated to the pandemic. Young persons 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, when compared to older workers, younger ones tended to have a less negative

view of the long-term effects of the pandemic on their working lives.

The participating Persons With Disabilities (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.



“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 reduced” (Participant I3F)

Atypical workers 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. When compared to typical workers, fewer atypical workers 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. Atypical workers' job stability might have been affected more by the pandemic when compared to other workers, as they were more likely to change their job due to the pandemic.

4. Recommendations

Trade union members developed the following recommendations to stakeholders in order to manage emerging challenges highlighted in this study:

4.1. Working from home (WFH) and organisational communication

Work performance and its evaluation

- Promote proper ICT infrastructure, procedures and targets to ensure that working hours are used effectively.
- Develop more effective ways of measuring performance when WFH.
- Focus more on task-based work evaluation than on time-based evaluation.
- Promote definite contracts on WFH, renewable every 6 months or annually.
- Focus more on employees' needs during organisational change.
- Manage better employees who abuse the system of WFH on an individual basis.
- Agree on a level of flexibility of working hours when WFH.
- Remunerate workers if asked to do work after working hours.
- Accept that not everyone would like to work from home.

- Tackle emerging challenges of employees who continue working from the office.

Awareness, education and training

- Educate workers on their rights and obligations when WFH.
- Educate employees on asserting their right to disconnect from work.
- Educate management not to disturb employees beyond their working hours.
- Increase awareness of management about the utility of empowering employees when WFH.
- Teach time management skills to management and employees (especially those WFH).
- Train for greater flexibility within working groups and within individual employees.
- Train educators to teach school children important future-oriented work-related skills.

Communication, meetings and agreements

- Optimise management memos (e.g. shorter, more attractive, better targeted).
- Enable unions to organise regular information sharing meetings with employees at employers' premises.

- Organise regular meetings between unions and management to identify and solve emerging problems and develop long-term plans (including contingency plans for potential future catastrophic events).
- Include quarantine leave in collective agreements.
- Include the practice of WFH in collective agreements.
- Share examples of good practice from collective agreements
- Provide shop stewards with special leave to be used to teach foreign workers about their rights and the role of unions, and to encourage union membership.
- Dedicate more resources to increasing union membership of foreigners.
- Unions should employ specialised workers to develop and implement a strategy to assist in the recruitment of foreign workers. These could visit work places and make contact with communities of foreigners in Malta among others.

4.2. Intercultural relations at work

Shop stewards, specialised workers, and union membership

- Strengthen shop stewards' role since they are better placed to communicate with workers, know more about technical aspects of collective agreements, and would also be aware of the recruitment of new employees.
- Train and empower shop stewards.
- Keep shop stewards in the loop about all their union's decisions about and correspondence with their work organisation.
- Increase the visibility of shop stewards in work organisations.
- Educate union members to reach out to shop stewards as their first union contact when required.
- Approach leaders of foreigner workers at workplace and community levels so that they encourage other foreigners to join trade unions.
- Facilitate union membership of those who may find membership fees too expensive (E.g. government may be encouraged to subsidise membership fees of such workers).

Skills and awareness

- Require from all workers at least basic knowledge of English or Maltese.
- Sensitise employers about the need that all workers should be able to speak English or Maltese.
- Train foreign workers about Maltese laws and working conditions to reduce abuse.

- Increase awareness about the existing union's training opportunities.
- Sensitise management to treat foreign workers humanely.

Laws, regulations and their enforcement

- Set up a taskforce composed of government, unions and employers' representatives to evaluate existing laws that negatively affect foreign workers, and recommend improvements.
- Put pressure on legislator to improve the impact of laws on foreign workers.
- Ensure that laws protect foreign workers who are whistle-blowers.
- Put pressure on government to improve working conditions in public sector contracts.
- Strengthen the enforcement of working conditions. Also focus on bogus self-employment.

4.3. Mental health and physical wellbeing

Mental health

- Organise regular talks about mental health to employees and encourage participation.
- Create awareness of mental health and the different types of employee support offered by specialised institutions.

- Train management (including team leaders) in sensitivity and interpersonal skills.

- Train employees in coping skills (e.g. how to control emotions).

- Include mental health considerations in health and safety practices at work.

- Replicate examples of good practices already being implemented by some companies.

- Appoint champions (trained in mental health first aid) at the workplace to serve as a reference point for mental health difficulties.

- Unions should provide a news letter service for their members, possibly in collaboration with specialised NGOs, to promote health at the workplace (This could include topics such as: anger management, parental skills, physical and mental wellbeing, coping with technology addiction etc).

Physical well-being

Management should promote healthy lifestyles through a variety of initiatives to ensure that all or most workers are reached. These are some examples:

- Create awareness about healthy eating through different initiatives such as talks by nutritionists and organising 'salad days'.

- Train employees time management skills and self-discipline.
- Include physical activities in team-building events.
- Create regular sports events that might appeal to different workers, including inter-departmental sports tournaments.
- Set up gyms at the workplace or subsidise gym subscriptions or membership in sports organisations.
- Set up showers at place of work (e.g. to encourage walking or cycling to work).
- Organise walking groups.
- Encourage small changes such as the use of stairs rather than lifts and workers' setting of regular alarms throughout the day as a reminder to stretch for a few minutes.