

characterised by the increasing presence of delivery persons observed as presenting “a new modern-day slavery”, a “new form of precarious employment.”³

Research and analysis produced data that could assist in better defining experiences of work during the pandemic. The outcomes of the research and analysis were integrated in the agenda and discussed during the Roundtable.

On the national scale, crisis management strategies to confront the pandemic in the different work sectors were broadly similar. The similarity refers to workplace health and safety conditions. Nonetheless, whilst sectors shared common challenges, they also had their specific hurdles. To summarise, one could argue the Covid-19 experiences have produced the good, the bad, and the ugly. Understood within the conditions imposed by the pandemic, and based on worker feedback, the ‘good’ refers to those sectors that could rapidly transfer workloads online and carry them out at home. The ‘bad’ refers to sectors such as manufacturing and import-based production in which workers feared having to face the axe as the principal nodes of the economic sector were being endangered including, not least, value supply chain distribution networks. The ‘ugly’ refers to the workers (not least, those employed in the sectors just mentioned) who faced unemployment or else deteriorating work/income conditions prospects unless they received emergency state assistance not forthcoming from their employers. These formed part of those categories hit hardest by the pandemic’s worsening conditions which indicated how the pandemic not only exposed economic power hierarchies, and specifically health inequality and injustice, it also began to critically widen the disparities. Along with these categories, were the essential and frontline workers who were directly exposed to the most threatening pandemic situations.

The following is a brief summary of the main findings from the Debono & Garzia (2022) Report, organised in (a) general terms, and (b) in terms of the specific worker categories addressed, i.e., women, youth, PWDs and atypical workers.

(a) Approximately two and a half years after the pandemic was officially declared, labour market recovery in Malta was positive and had returned to pre-pandemic levels. Beyond the quantitative assertion of a recovery and return to pre-pandemic ‘normality’ in employment numbers, the qualitative feedback projected a more nuanced situation. During the

³ Working poor presence and quotes from GWU (2023). *Pre Budget 2023 Proposals*. Retrieved March 22, 2023, from <https://cdn.newsbook.com.mt/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/21161626/Pre-Budget-Proposals-2023-Final.pdf>.

pandemic, many employers had provided all the necessary work-related support their workers required. This is not difficult to understand. It meant provision of training, equipment, and protection procedures. At the same time, employers pushed to raise productivity. Debono & Garzia (2022) also mentioned lost career opportunities and post-pandemic increased workloads, not least because of backlog and work schedule changes. These led to increased stress levels. Workers were in a difficult state forced to regain and consolidate job stability.

Paradoxically, those sectors which, as mentioned above, fell within the relatively ‘good’ conditions of work in spite of the pandemic were, two and a half years later and as mentioned above, suffering increasing workloads and associated adapting-to-recovery conditions. We have termed this category as ‘good’ and this must be understood in relative terms. Having transferred work online, and at home, had led to lack of privacy and trust, increased surveillance, difficult-to-disconnect situations, etc., experiences already familiar in certain workplaces in pre-pandemic times (banking, accountancy, etc.). This was another confirmation of the fine line that separated work from private life. Such negative experiences were strongly reconfirmed during the Roundtable where it was claimed that although workers were working at home and not directly on the frontline, some still had to deal with clients and management from their homes and this type of work was even more stressful during the pandemic. Thus, a participant in one government department related how decisions were still being taken by management and besides, adding further to the alienating state, workers working at home were kept ‘in limbo’ or merely informed.

(b) In terms of specific categories of disadvantaged workers – women, youth, PWDs and atypical –, their employment situation worsened during Covid-19.

Debono & Garzia (2022) reported that amongst the disadvantaged groups, female participants had significantly higher levels of job security during the pandemic. This was especially the case with mothers and was the result of different factors including not having the option to freely consider leaving their job because of the pandemic and caring for others. Women were more likely to work from home when compared to men. As the authors warn, “almost all participants in this study were trade union members, thus enjoying a certain level of protection irrespective of their gender” and also, the “higher concentration of women in essential services (such as healthcare) and services that were least disturbed by the pandemic (such as finance)” (ibid., p.45).

Younger persons were less satisfied with working conditions than older workers and constituted one of the highest job mobility groups throughout the pandemic. They suffered a higher reduction of working hours. Reasons given by the employers for this were their relatively limited experiences and higher needs of supervision. Conversely, the research showed that young workers were those predicting least negative effects of Covid-19 on their future work.

PWDs experienced increased work-related stress levels during the pandemic especially in dealing with clients. This group denounced inadequate health and safety training as well as support from workmates. In spite of physical health worries and the presage of negative effects on their future career prospects, they did not think about leaving their job during the pandemic.

Atypical workers were less likely to have worked from home during the pandemic and this explains the positive observation reported above that this category was provided with health and safety measures at work as well as enough equipment and procedures for personal protection. Proper and adequate managerial communications on issues relating to Covid-19 were higher with this category as it was with all those working outside their homes.⁴

Job instability, confirming this as a defining factor of this group of disadvantaged workers, was overall highest. An experience characterising these categories was transport to work during the pandemic. Many in the specific worker categories mentioned above had to travel by public transport where social distancing was practically impossible. One keeps in mind that cultural, entertainment and sport events were closed for health precautions whereas the workplaces of the disadvantaged groups under observation were kept open and they carried on with their work.

⁴ “The most emerging issue” raised during a Malta Council for Economic and Social Development – the main nation-wide social dialogue forum – meeting dated June 1, 2020 was “the need of flexible working as a tool to be used appropriately to the needs of the future of work”, a response to the “trend of non-standard forms of employment”, and expressing flexibility in terms of, “temporary employment; part-time and on-call work; temporary agency work and other multi-party employment relationships; disguised employment and dependent self-employment.” Retrieved March 22, 2023, from <https://mcesd.org.mt/mcesd-hosts-meeting-for-social-partners-on-future-of-work/>. The brainstorming event discussed basic protection of the worker; minimum wage, social security and sick leave; freedom of association; rights to collective bargaining; and revision of labour laws re-enhanced manoeuvrability under force majeure or extreme circumstances.

One final mention refers to migrant workers. Given the negative hype on social media, it was to be expected to observe relatively increased friction between some Maltese and foreign workers, especially third country nationals (TNCs). Already anticipated by the populist discourse heralding wage dumping and racist slurs, foreign workers especially those suffering from the precarity of work and residence, were accused of a high level of infection risks, and also side-stepping Covid-19 safety measures.⁵

⁵ The insertion of women in the labour market, lured by the provision of free child care, has been considered one successful page in Malta’s post-2014 labour market policies. However, even this did not compare to the increase of a foreign workforce that numbered more than a quarter of the total workforce in 2020. This “has been the largest contributor to the growth of Malta’s labour force and has contributed significantly to overall economic performance.” Fabri JP, Fenech G, Ellul J, Marmara V; (2020) *Digital Malta, Digital transformation as a route to national productivity and competitiveness. National Productivity Report 2021*. Retrieved March 22, 2023, from <https://nationalproductivityboard.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/National-Productivity-Report-2021.pdf>. The non-EU cohort was the fastest growing and by September 2020 outnumbered EU nationals.

