

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

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



PETER LANG

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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