



research article

Renegotiating solidarity and deservingness during the COVID-19 pandemic: the role of frontline social work

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, a dual dynamic became visible in welfare states: on the one hand, vulnerability intensified, particularly among people in precarious legal situations; on the other hand, inclusive measures in solidarity with groups usually excluded were expanded. In this exceptional context, notions of belonging, solidarity and (un)deservingness were renegotiated. At the heart of these processes, frontline social workers played a pivotal role. Drawing on 80 semi-structured interviews with representatives of frontline organisations in Switzerland, complemented by participant observation, we identify three key dimensions in these negotiations: belonging, solidarity and deservingness. Frontline social workers found themselves in a position where the civic engagement rationale of belonging gained new prominence. They actively contributed to shaping shifts within what Sarah Schilliger called an 'infrastructure of solidarity' while navigating scarce resources, moral evaluations and the ethical principles of social work. With this article, we seek to advance the understanding of the role of frontline social work in negotiation processes during times of crisis and beyond.

Keywords frontline social work • civic engagement organisations • solidarity • deservingness • COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction

During the pandemic, the world switched into crisis mode. According to [Bruzelius and Ratzmann \(2020\)](#), a double dynamic could be observed in welfare countries: vulnerability increased, especially among people in precarious legal situations, while, at the same time, inclusive measures in solidarity with otherwise largely excluded groups expanded. In this exceptional situation, belonging (see, for example, [Wamsler et al, 2023](#); [Bhanye, 2024](#)), solidarity (see, for example, [Bruzelius and Ratzmann, 2020](#); [Tonelli et al, 2024](#)) and deservingness (see, for example, [Bridgman et al, 2022](#); [Mejia et al, 2022](#); [Huang and Guseva, 2025](#)) were renegotiated. The moral assessment of social configurations of inequality was questioned and contested, and the responses to it were repoliticised ([Schwiertz et al, 2025](#)).

Right in the middle of those renegotiations, frontline social workers found themselves as reliant crisis responders ([Brodkin, 2021](#)). In Switzerland, they secured essential structures for people in highly precarious situations ([Drilling et al, 2024b](#)). In reference to street-level bureaucrats ([Lipsky, 2010](#); [Brodkin, 2011](#)), we understand frontline social workers as state and non-state organisations that directly engage with people in precarious situations and offer essential support to them. During the pandemic, frontline social work organisations (FSWOs) and social workers themselves faced new precarities, additional workloads, staff shortages and the risk of being infected themselves ([Lotta et al, 2023](#)). At the same time, they also experienced more freedom, decision-making power and money, which opened ‘windows of opportunity’ ([Bruzelius and Ratzmann, 2020](#)).

In this article, we argue that during the pandemic, three dimensions of frontline social work negotiations came to the forefront: belonging, solidarity and (un)deservingness for support. In those negotiations, frontline social workers played a crucial role. They applied a different and what we call ‘civic engagement’ rationale of belonging (see [Carmel and Sojka, 2021](#)), actively shaped qualitative changes in an ‘infrastructure of solidarity’ ([Schilliger, 2020](#)) and navigated between moral assessments and the core ethical principles of social work ([IFSW, 2018](#)). Traces of those three dimensions of frontline social work negotiations are thereby still visible today, such as the existence of new alliances or sharpened organisational profiles.

With this article, we contribute to the analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as of its impact in the realm of frontline social work and social security structures. We aim at deepening the understanding of the role of frontline social work in negotiation processes during a crisis situation, as well as beyond.

Theoretical framework

In this article, we ask how renegotiation processes of belonging, deservingness and solidarity during the pandemic interplayed with practices of frontline social work. In our analysis, we draw on several theories, particularly the concept of deservingness, the rationales of belonging ([Carmel and Sojka, 2021](#)) and the infrastructure of solidarity ([Schilliger, 2020](#)).

Deservingness is often described as an assessment of moral worth ([Flaherty, 2021](#)). Morality is thereby not something given but refers to what is thought of as proper or valuable in particular contexts ([Montesi and Calestani, 2021: 11](#)). [Streinzer and Tošić \(2022: 2\)](#) describe deservingness as a ‘moral assessment of processes of distribution’

and focus on distribution processes that result in the (re)production of unequal societal configurations. The moral assessment of these processes justifies, normalises and contests this configuration of inequality. It is always situated in power structures (Streinzer and Tošić, 2022: 4), in which such categories as class, gender, race and religion, as well as their intersection, play an important role (Van Oorschot, 2008; Assouline and Gilad, 2022).

(Un)Deservingness can also be understood as ‘the flip side of rights’ (Willen and Cook, 2022: 71). Rights to a certain distribution represent an institutionalisation of entitlement. Deservingness is the moral assessment of these entitlements and whether they are perceived as legitimate or unfair. Nevertheless, ideas of (un)deservingness and rights can blend into each other, and as an analytical lens, deservingness challenges a ‘clear-cut separation between rights and morality. Instead, it shows how some groups of actors use moralization to legitimize violence or to call impersonal rights into question in relation to others’ (Streinzer and Tošić, 2022: 7). In addition to legal categorisations, access to entitlements also depends on the subjective interpretation of street-level bureaucrats, who apply the law, provide the services and have a certain discretion (Ratzmann et al, 2024). This can also be the case when it comes to access to resources that are distributed by volunteers, activists or people working for non-governmental organisations. Over the years, an important body of research on (un)deservingness has been established on welfare state distribution (see, for example, Applebaum, 2001; Van Oorschot, 2006; Birch, 2022; Ratzmann et al, 2024). The welfare state is based on the idea of social solidarity between individuals and provides access to state benefits and services. Those welfare arrangements and subsequent redistribution commonly take place within national borders and rely on the idea that nationals share ‘a common national “culture”, and have contributed to the financing of the welfare state’ (Ratzmann et al, 2024: 637). According to Carmel and Sojka (2021), deservingness is thereby not nuanced enough to describe the complexity of governing practices and political discourse when it comes to migration and social rights. They instead suggest conceptualising deservingness as the specific combination of four types of ‘rationales of belonging’. Those rationales describe the terms and practices of social membership and are organised around temporal-territorial, ethno-cultural, labourist, welfarist and transnational logics (Carmel and Sojka, 2021). They create social exclusion, as well as the justification for inclusion. During the pandemic, such ‘rationales of belonging’, as well as other moral values like the legitimacy of the ‘suffering body’, which is part of a humanitarian logic (Fassin, 2001; 2012; Ticktin, 2011), came to the forefront.

During crises, humanitarian responses and new practices of solidarity emerge (Schwartz et al, 2025). Whereas humanitarianism is often about releasing the bodily suffering of a ‘victim without a perpetrator’ (Ticktin, 2011: 11), solidarity is described as a relational and spatial practice (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2018: 26) that takes place within a particular (political) context. Solidarity creates collective identities, as well as political subjects, and shapes the spaces in which social relations can take place. According to Hunt-Hendrix (2018), solidarity is about ‘finding commonality in difference’ or about seeing one’s ‘own story as bound up in the story of others’. Nevertheless, the boundaries between humanitarianism and solidarity are blurred and cannot always be neatly separated (Fleischmann, 2020). Practices of solidarity, as well as humanitarianism, contain ambivalences. They can vary from a particular way of relating, caring and alliance building to containing paternalistic, hierarchical

and exclusionary practices (see, for example, [Fleischmann, 2020](#); [Schilliger, 2020](#); [Schwiertz and Schwenken, 2020](#)).

The concept of an infrastructure of solidarity provides a way to explore ‘how practices of solidarity may become sedimented in time and space and how broad ties are built between groups of people that are structurally located in very distinct social positions’ ([Schilliger, 2020](#): 532). According to Schilliger, this includes four elements that promote solidarity: a particular way of relating to others and establish relationships of care; the production of common terrains, which can be sites of struggle as well as of encounters; solidarity work and alliance building, which is dissimilar from charitable and often paternalistic forms of support; and the ongoing production of common terrains and creation of alternative imaginaries. By referring to [Simone’s \(2004\)](#) people as infrastructure, Schilliger applies an expanded understanding of infrastructure as emerging from social practices. This concept of practices of solidarity and their outcomes should be analysed more deeply and in the long run, instead of focusing on ‘the outcome of the day’ ([Schilliger, 2020](#): 543).

Practices of solidarity are thereby entangled with ideas of (un)deservingness and belonging, for example, when we think about who is included and excluded from solidarity or why particular hierarchies emerge within solidarity ([Bähre, 2022](#)). In the following, we will look at this entanglement during the pandemic and the role of frontline social workers in it.

Method and context

This article draws on the research project ‘Frontline Work in Humanitarian Disasters: Bridging State and Non-State Rationalities Towards Region-Based, Multi-Layered Crisis Management’, conducted within the National Research Program NRP 80 ‘Covid-19 in Society’, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. In the winter of 2023/24, the project team carried out more than 80 semi-structured interviews with representatives of FSWOs and frontline social workers in three regions of Switzerland. They were expert interviews in which no sensitive data were collected. In addition, the main author engaged in participant observation in a street kitchen (September 2024–June 2025, around 20 visits), an organisation that has undergone significant changes since the pandemic.

For data analysis, we developed a coding scheme to which we added *in vivo* codes ([Breidenstein et al, 2013](#)). Transcribed interviews and fieldnotes were coded following [Mayring’s \(2022\)](#) qualitative content analysis approach. Our analytical process asked what themes emerged from the material regarding frontline social work and gradually identified the mechanisms of exclusion that shifted in the context of the pandemic. We used this finding and conducted a keyword-based literature search about frontline social work and exclusion in times of the pandemic (databases: Web of Science, Scopus and JSTOR), complemented by snowballing when relevant articles or new keywords were identified. In dialogue with theory around those terms (see, for example, [Bruzelius and Ratzmann, 2020](#); [Bridgman et al, 2022](#); [Mejia et al, 2022](#)), we empirically deepened our data and found that 14 interviews particularly addressed these topics. This article is based on these 14 interviews. Of these, six were professional social workers directly supporting individuals during the pandemic, one interviewee represented a state authority, and seven interviewees were non-professional actors engaged in frontline activities or working at a logistical or strategic level

without direct contact with people in need. The organisations represented included a food bank, assisted living facilities for people with addictions, a street kitchen, a shelter for homeless women and initiatives providing financial or social support to undocumented migrants or people living in poverty. In line with [Ataç and Schilliger's \(2022\)](#) categorisation, our sample includes civic, institutional and autonomous FSWOs. Particular attention is paid to the street kitchen, which contains criteria of a civic as well as an autonomous FSWO, financed primarily through donations.

Theorising empirical findings: three dimensions of frontline social work negotiations during crisis

'They are not taking our people in': different rationales of belonging

We sat down in a small and rather packed office for an interview about the pandemic. Barbara is the leader of the street kitchen. She is full of energy and willpower when it comes to the activities of her organisation. During the pandemic, the street kitchen organised additional emergency sleeping options in a hostel for some of the users of the street kitchen. She remembers:

I remember clearly that it was Good Friday 2020. A few weeks earlier, we had seen the [municipality] is not doing anything. They are not taking our people in [the emergency shelter of the municipality and the hotel that was rented by the municipality administration because of the health measures during the pandemic]. Anyone who wasn't registered ... couldn't get a room at the hotel. But the hotels were empty. And the hostel ... was empty too. So, we looked for sponsors and rented the entire wing. That was relatively easy because people also recognised that there was a gap [in support].... So, we rented this wing for a month and a half and had 15 very vulnerable people there: elderly women and people with pre-existing conditions. Together with volunteers ... we worked day and night to ensure that there were no incidents and no anger. That's how we took care of the most important people. We provided them with breakfast, and they came to get food twice a day.

In the interview, Barbara speaks of a conflictual situation with the municipal administration. Due to the distancing and isolation measures, the municipality-owned emergency shelter had to significantly reduce its number of beds. Therefore, during the first wave of the pandemic (March 2020), the municipality administration organised additional emergency places in a hotel. However, when the homeless people were assigned to the emergency shelter and the hotel, the applicable access rules were not changed. Non-residents of the commune had to pay around €40 (£35) per night, and those who were without residence rights in Switzerland could take advantage of the overnight stay but had to be reported to the immigration authorities the next day, which made expulsion likely. The hostel, run by the street kitchen, therefore became a safe place for homeless people from outside of the commune. During an interview, a state actor reflected on the access to emergency shelter during the pandemic and said:

And we had a certain clientele that we had in normal times, who kind of flew under the radar. So, people from outside the [municipality] or those

who don't have a registration, right? And when space became scarce, the surrounding [municipalities] were clearly informed that we could no longer take theirs. So, we really limited ourselves to responsibility for those registered in [the municipality], so to speak, right? And the others were only taken in a very restrictive way or not at all, right?... That has partly remained so because the question was then really raised, 'Is it the job of the [municipality] to provide this infrastructure for people from outside the [municipality]'?

During the pandemic, the municipality drew a clearer line when it came to responsibilities than in 'normal times', as the previous state actor reflected. It is a welfarist rationale of belonging that came to the forefront more strongly and cut across practices where people had been 'flying under the radar'. According to [Carmel and Sojka \(2021\)](#), this welfarist rationale means that based on laws, welfare states establish terms, conditions and degrees of belonging and regulate the people through these. Those who are considered as belonging in this rationale have the right to welfare state support and guaranteed access to it. This access is constant, predictable and enforceable by law.

Those not considered as belonging in this welfarist rationale do not have guaranteed access to welfare state support. Here, support is often organised by civil society organisations, where, as we argue, a civil engagement rationale of belonging is at stake. Such a rationale is characterised by its high diversity, as well as irregularity. Some FSWOs orient themselves at welfarist rationales of belonging, others follow different rationales of belonging, such as labourist rationales ([Carmel and Sojka, 2021](#)), and yet others try to be as free of criteria and rationales of belonging as possible when it comes to access to their support offer. In contradiction to the welfarist rationale, the civic engagement rationale of belonging is much more unpredictable and not enforceable by law. It often depends on the financial donors (state as well as non-state), the conditions that come with the money (for example, only to support families) and the people who are engaged in those organisations and their ethical standards.

To sum up, the pandemic brought a dynamic into the routines of the rationales of belonging and provoked action for organisational change and, through these decision-making processes, affected the users. In our case, we described an FSWO that did not agree with the welfarist rationale enacted by the municipality, which left vulnerable people behind. They organised their support from different sets of donors. Those shifts often happened during the pandemic (see [Drilling et al, 2024a](#)) and indicate a new dynamic of infrastructures of solidarity ([Schilliger, 2020](#)).

'People suddenly seemed to care': co-producing an infrastructure of solidarity

I met my interlocutor to talk about the pandemic and how their organisation experienced it. It is a small, non-hierarchical and participatory organisation that supports undocumented migrants. My interlocutor told me:

I mean, the whole thing [the pandemic] was such a strange experience, suddenly finding yourself in a society where people suddenly seemed to care about each other. It was very unusual, at least at the beginning of COVID, when everyone was suddenly so generous, there was a generous mood, and suddenly, there was money to be distributed somehow.

FSWOs that had never received financial support from formal funding agencies before were, as our interlocutor repeatedly emphasised, ‘suddenly’ supported during the pandemic. Many of them received support from the Swiss Solidarity Foundation, which collected 43 million Swiss francs in civil society donations (Drilling et al, 2024b), while others received support from private companies and donors. Interlocutors from more established, institutional and civic FSWOs described this spirit of generosity during the pandemic as a ‘dip into the honey pot’, or as follows:

And then, suddenly, [names the foundation] gave us a million. And [names the foundation] also advertised on its networks, with all the foundations they normally work with. So, we got a call almost every day saying, ‘We’d like to give you another 100,000 SFr [£90,000]’. And we were like ... you’ve been knocking on doors for years, and nothing happened, right?

Not only were private foundations and donors willing to support some organisations financially for the first time during the pandemic but so was the state. A Swiss regional administration, for example, provided financial assistance to an organisation that explicitly supports undocumented migrants.

While Switzerland lacks comprehensive reporting on private financial flows during the COVID-19 pandemic, individual reports from foundations like Swiss Solidarity and large humanitarian organisations like Caritas, HEKS and the Swiss Red Cross indicate the extraordinary mobilisation of resources outside the state system. This means that the pandemic brought attention to questions of solidarity and the support of people in precarious situations.

At this point, we would like to put forward the thesis that the pandemic has led to a change in the landscape and infrastructure of solidarity. An infrastructure of solidarity (Schilliger, 2020) is constituted by various actors and FSWOs, which can include civic, institutional and autonomous (Ataç and Schilliger, 2022). The concept and the categorisation were developed in the context of support for undocumented migrants and urban citizenship practices. The FSWOs we discuss in our article include not only organisations that support undocumented migrants but also individuals facing precarity that is not necessarily linked to their residency status (for example, poverty). Following Schwartz et al (2025: 406), we understand solidarity initiatives ‘with, alongside and against the state’, where the state is not a unitary entity opposite to civil society but a ‘material condensation of social forces and struggles’. FSWOs thereby foster a more inclusive and solidaristic city, for example, by providing practical support to realise basic rights. Those practices create opportunities for encounters and relations of solidarity, as well as ‘a (counter-)space on different scales’ (Ataç and Schilliger, 2022: 326), particularly for people who do not find (enough) belonging in the welfarist rationale.

The infrastructure of solidarity, with its (counter-)spaces and opportunities, faced significant challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic; it not only expanded quantitatively and in its dynamics but also underwent qualitative transformations. FSWOs had to adapt their services from providing a warm meal in a communal space to offering takeaway options, where everyone would eat separately outside. Group activities like workshops, social events or language courses had to be cancelled, and certain offers were paused, such as a cloth shop for people living in poverty. Some FSWOs switched to digital options or strictly limited the time per person of physical consulting.

In assisted living settings, frontline social workers were much more occupied with implementing COVID-19 security health measures and monitoring compliance with them. Their work became more controlling, as one frontline social worker explained, and relationship work had less space.

In some cases, the pandemic also led to a simplification and a low bureaucratic level of procedures. Mechanisms of control were thereby (temporarily) suspended. One organisation that distributes money to people in acute financial distress had a drastic increase in the number of requests during the second wave of the pandemic (in the winter of 2020/21). They could not hire more staff, so they simplified the application process, for example, also accepting non-formal proof of income. Certain aspects of the infrastructure of solidarity, which, in their case, included the control of eligibility criteria, were increasingly questioned, and the relationship between control and speed became visible, as an interviewee pointed out. The organisation she works for supports people with a residence permit but who live on a small budget and have an emergency financial need. She said:

So, we have to decide whether it has to be 100 per cent accurate, which would be at the cost of the speed of timely assistance, or whether it has to be as fast as possible, which would be at the expense of maximum accuracy and specificity. So, you really need to understand this mechanism and then be a little brave enough to say, 'OK, it's important to be fast now and also a little more generous', knowing that this will result in a certain degree of uncertainty.... The question you have to ask yourself is whether it's right and sensible to invest so much of this money in accuracy and not in assistance.... Because our goal is, 'What effect do we want to achieve? And what mechanisms and methods are most likely to get us there?'

According to this quote, the pandemic initiated a debate about the goal and the costs of an offer for people in need and had an impact on how ideas of solidarity through support were implemented. The thresholds were set lower during the pandemic, and instead of control, supports were often built on trust.

An infrastructure of solidarity further provides opportunities for new alliances between people that would not otherwise necessarily be united and brings differently situated people together (Schilliger, 2020: 541). Unlike charitable relationships, solidaristic relationships are not 'from above' but have their origin in everyday struggles. During the pandemic, charitable as well as solidaristic relationships were established and strengthened, all of which, as well as their entanglement, are captured in the infrastructure of solidarity. This includes new collaborations among actors, as well as the rise of new initiatives, as one of the interlocutors explained:

This was during the time when people were told that older people, in particular, should not leave their homes or go shopping. And [name of the group that initiated it] thought, 'Come on, let's help them with their shopping'. So, they set up a Facebook group.... It grew quite quickly. Lots of people thought, 'Sure, I'm young. I don't have anything to do right now. I'd like to do some shopping for older people'. That's why it was started. And then we realised that older people aren't really on Facebook, so [name of the

group] set up a phone number. And with the help of all the people in the Facebook group, we organised flyer distribution campaigns. The flyers were translated into X different languages.... And then the flyers were distributed very widely.... And the phone started ringing off the hook very quickly.

To sum up, the pandemic marked a qualitative shift in the infrastructure of solidarity. It revealed how solidarity is produced and sustained through everyday practices and relations of care and how diverse civil society actors occupy distinct positions in shaping this infrastructure. What emerged was not merely an expansion of support but a reconfiguration of the landscape through the principles, actors and practices through which solidarity is organised. This transformation underscores the centrality of frontline social work practices in redefining the terms of belonging and support during crisis and points to their enduring significance beyond the pandemic.

'First, we looked according to vulnerability': negotiating (un)deservingness in frontline social work

What sparked the additional support during the pandemic was the fear of life and death. Following Fassin (2001) and Ticktin (2011), there is an unquestioned universality towards the imagined suffering body, which appears especially during moments of crisis. Thereby, the imagined suffering body is a 'victim without a perpetrator' (Ticktin, 2011: 11), where no one is responsible for the suffering. Ticktin argues that the universality of the suffering body is only recognised when this suffering is perceived as morally legitimate. This can lead to the 'paradoxically privileged position as the most disenfranchised' who is the worthiest of care and reproduces political realities (Ticktin, 2011: 12). The street kitchen, which organised additional shelter options for homeless people in a hostel, was also driven to act by the life-threatening situations faced by the people they support. As Barbara from the street kitchen recalled:

We thought that the pandemic would sweep through our guests like the Grim Reaper because they are in poor general health, they have a lot of pre-existing respiratory conditions, they have many cardiovascular diagnoses, they sleep outdoors, they have many open wounds. That's exactly what you would say: they are in poor condition, full stop. And the exact opposite happened. But not knowing this, we tried to get everyone in.

Since the beds they could offer were limited, they had to decide who would be able to sleep in the hostel. As Barbara explained:

First, we looked according to vulnerability. So, the elderly ladies, of course, elderly ladies first, obviously. And then, of course, we also had to look a little bit at who was really homeless. Not just living in precarious circumstances but really on the streets. Those were the next ones. And then we had to look a little bit at how socially compatible they were because they were all relatively close to each other. They had to share bathrooms, showers and toilets.... So, we had to make sure they were reasonably peaceful people.

The street kitchen generally strives to avoid turning anyone away, which created a tension between targeted support and inclusivity in the case of the limited sleeping options. By applying an egalitarian triage model that sought to provide care to those in greatest need and a ranking based on vulnerability and the severity of illness (Tabery et al, 2008), the street kitchen sought to uphold the ethical principles of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2018), which recognise the inherent dignity of all human beings and promote social justice. Nevertheless, the decision about who was granted access to a safe overnight stay in the hostel expressed a particular understanding of vulnerability. Here, vulnerability was framed through an age- and gender-based concept, as well as references to homelessness and precarious circumstances. The decision further considered social behaviours.

These assessments translated into informal judgements of deservingness, attempting to identify those who were apparently (or known to be) worst off under the conditions of the pandemic. This resulted in an improvised set of criteria: while some decisions reflected an acute awareness of specific vulnerabilities, others were not considered, and the overall approach remained flexible and accommodating. In this way, the street kitchen's decision template illustrates the negotiation between deservingness-based assessments and egalitarian principles of access (Tabery et al, 2008), highlighting the practical dilemmas inherent in infrastructures of solidarity during crises. By navigating the tension between targeted support and inclusivity, the street kitchen illustrates how infrastructures of solidarity during the pandemic had to balance ethical considerations, understandings of core target groups (such as vulnerable people) and accessibility.

This navigation also needed to be done by many other organisations during the pandemic, for example, by a recreation space for homeless women. The organisation faced a scarcity of space due to the COVID-19 security health measures. Usually, they offer an open space where women can come and go anonymously during open hours as they please. Due to the required contact tracing during the pandemic, this anonymity was not provided to the same extent anymore, and due to scarce space, they had to decide that homeless women and 'survival assistance' had priority because they were the most vulnerable. Regardless of the approach adopted, frontline social work organisations like the women's space remained acutely aware of the consequences of their decisions and described the prioritisation as an 'awful' thing that they had to do.

Conflicts in relation to (un)deservingness also came into play in other contexts of FSWOs during the pandemic, for example, in combination with the fact that the staff were at risk of being infected themselves. As one interlocutor explained:

I found it very difficult to somehow block that out and still maintain a good relationship. To say, you know, to abstract it and say, 'He's also someone who, in this situation, just can't stick to the rules, right?'. Which normally isn't a problem for me at all, right? They are who they are. That's why they're with us, right? So, let's deal with it. And because of the virus and everything that was interpreted into it and all the dangers that were associated with it, I noticed that my understanding of their disability or illness diminished. Then, I was less able to compensate for it. And that was interesting to observe.

To sum up, the negotiation of (un)deservingness during the pandemic illustrates how frontline social work organisations were compelled to establish criteria under

conditions of urgency, scarcity and moral uncertainty. In practice, access to support was decided through improvised hierarchies of vulnerability. For people in precarious situations, this meant that assistance could be both more generous and more restrictive: thresholds were lowered in some respects, while new boundaries emerged in others. For FSWOs, these decisions created ethical tensions between inclusivity and triage. The process made visible that deservingness is not fixed but continuously contested, shaping both lived experiences and organisational practices during crisis.

Navigating through uncertainties: discussion

It is summertime, and the street kitchen has a reduced opening schedule. The pandemic is rather far away by now. The street kitchen kept organising sleeping possibilities for elderly women during winter. In addition to that, they try to find long-term sleeping possibilities for them. A few days ago, an excited email reached me. Barbara wrote that they are working together with other social organisations specialised in homelessness to negotiate the access criteria for emergency sleeping with state authorities. (Field notes)

The COVID-19 pandemic marked an epochal crisis on a medical, economic and social level (Dörre, 2020), where daily routines were broken, decisions were quickly taken and rules, values and behaviours were newly negotiated. We were interested in the role that FSWOs played in such a crisis and the negotiation processes it brought with it. We found that in three dimensions of frontline social work negotiations, they were particularly crucial actors. Frontline organisations came into a position where the civic engagement rationale of belonging became more accentuated; they actively shaped qualitative changes and an infrastructure of solidarity where practices were adapted to COVID-19 health measures and frontline social workers navigated scarce resources, moral assessment and ethical principles of social work. All of this was done with a lot of commitment, as well as many challenges.

The three dimensions of frontline social work negotiations thereby interact with each other. The civic engagement rationale of belonging, which often appears in reaction to the welfarist rationale of belonging and its exclusion, influences the infrastructure of solidarity and how it evolves. Ideas of (un)deservingness and ethical principles are negotiated, reproduced and contested. In all of those dimensions, the irregularity, uncertainty and high commitment of frontline social workers to navigate those uncertainties and improve the support structure for people in need became very visible. So did their powerful position with regard to support structures and access to them.

The pandemic offered a 'window of opportunity' (Ratzmann et al, 2024) and enabled the organisations to put their ideas, assessments and imaginaries to the forefront and to be in this exceptional moment in a more powerful and visible position. Not everything that characterised this window of opportunity during the pandemic lasted afterwards, especially when we look at financial state support, for example, for organisations that support undocumented migrants. This support was punctual and bound to the pandemic. It did not go beyond a humanitarian crisis intervention to release the suffering of victims (Ticktin, 2011). After the pandemic, the imagined suffering bodies were no longer perceived to be in crisis.

In other cases, such as the new initiatives that were founded or the new offer by the street kitchen, traces of the pandemic are left today. New initiatives created new networks, and the street kitchen also formed new alliances with other FSWOs, as described earlier. This alliance tries to negotiate adaptations when it comes to emergency shelter and to bring about change on a structural level.

Our findings also support [Schwartz et al \(2025\)](#), who stated that crises tend to repoliticise solidarity. The pandemic politicised the street kitchen and led to a change in its organisational form. Before the pandemic, they could be categorised as a civic FSWO with state funding. After the pandemic, they also comprise criteria of an autonomous FSWO with only private donors but also, as they told us, 'more freedom' in their actions and in navigating uncertainties.

What the pandemic ultimately exposed is that solidarity is not a static resource but a fragile and contested practice, dependent on shifting moralities, institutional arrangements and the capacity of organisations to improvise. Frontline social work thus operates in a space where ethical commitments and pragmatic constraints are constantly balanced, making visible the tensions that normally remain hidden in routine welfare provision. Furthermore, the experiences documented here point to the need to recognise these organisations not only as service providers but also as actors that shape the social and political fabric in times of uncertainty. How their role will evolve in the face of future crises remains an open question, especially as many of the changes observed during the pandemic have since given way to a return to earlier equilibria.

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Contributor statement

LS collected the data and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. LS and MD jointly developed the argument and wrote the final version of the article. LS conducted the main body of the empirical and analytical work. MD contributed to conceptual development and manuscript revision.

Data availability statement

The authors take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the analysis.

Research ethics statement

Formal ethical approval was not required for the study according to institutional guidelines. The research design and procedures were discussed within the research team from multiple disciplinary perspectives. All participating experts were informed about the purpose of the study and provided their informed consent prior to participation.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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