

Article

# **Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work of social workers - a comparison between Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands**

by

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**Keywords:**

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## **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on everyone's life. Like many other professionals, social workers have been forced to adapt to these new working conditions and new challenges in order to support clients during the pandemic, as new needs have arisen. Together with professional associations from three nations (Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands), we used a coordinated approach to explore the consequences of the pandemic for social work professionals. This study was conducted during the most severe contact and hygiene restrictions of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the winter of 2020/2021. The data addresses the changes perceived by social work professionals in relation to their contact and communication with clients, the use of digital technology in the context of work, the professional response in terms of innovation, the working conditions and the psychosocial risks they face.

## *Methods*

Cross-sectional data was collected from 7,241 social workers in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands through online surveys.

## *Results*

The results show an increase in the workload of professional social workers and compounding problems of clients, together with a negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communication and contact with clients. All of this takes place within the framework of changing working conditions and contexts. Our data shows that the use of digital technologies does not cause bigger problems for most of the participating social workers. It should in fact be noted that professionals have many positive associations with the use of digital technology in general.

## *Conclusions*

There are both remarkable and alarming results concerning the mental health of social workers and their working conditions, as well as the position of the social work profession in general.

*Keywords:* social work profession, international comparison, COVID-19 pandemic, use of technology, contact professional and client, working conditions for professionals

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on everyone's life. In public discussions, the pandemic situation is often referred to as a (global) crisis for societies. Like many other professionals, social workers have been forced to adapt to these new conditions and new challenges to offer continued support to clients in times of COVID-19, as new needs are generated, and the services social workers normally provide have been restricted for a long time, and are still only possible to a limited extent even now.

In this study, we have compared the experiences of social workers in three European countries in relation to the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The reactions of political systems to the pandemic in the countries studied were similar, albeit with certain national and regional differences. During the first wave of COVID-19, Switzerland, Germany and the Netherlands announced a near complete lockdown of almost all public social activities including, for example, (primary, secondary) schools, shops, indoor events and team sports. People were able to freely use outdoor public spaces in small groups. During the summer months there were only a few restrictions kept in place regarding public events, compulsory face masks in public transport and other public indoor places, etc. With the rise of the second wave, more restrictive regulations were reinstated in October 2020, but which may be characterized as moderate (schools continued teaching in class, private events could be held with a restricted number of visitors, etc.). In all three countries, regulations were further tightened during the winter months (December, 2020), including school closures and night-time curfews in parts of Germany and the whole of the Netherlands.

The fact that regulations taken to combat the pandemic would have psychological and social consequences, in addition to economic ones, and would therefore contribute to an intensification of social inequality, has already been pointed out in various places (BFS, 2020, Beuchat & Grob, 2020; DIW, 2020; Huang, 2020; Turner, 2020; Hildebrandt, 2021). Besides this, social workers experienced a sudden shift, mainly from face-to-face contact to delivering their services online or through other electronic devices. This resulted in social workers adapting their services to the

needs of their clients, and searching for creative solutions. The impact of the sudden increase in the use of these ICT services was visible in issues concerning confidentiality, privacy and professional boundaries, as well as the awareness that some groups of clients could be reached more easily than others with the help of ICT (Mishna, Milne, Bogo, & Pereira, 2020; Nieuwboer & Bos, 2020; Schell-Kiehl, van Rest, & Vos, 2020).

Despite this, the public debate on policy regulations in all three countries has been primarily led by medical and economic experts. In this discourse, social work appears to have been marginalized rather than regarded as a profession whose expertise and assessments could be fed into the political discourse on overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic (Wagner, 2020; Böllert, 2020).

This contrasts with social work's own perception of being a profession that can play a central role in overcoming crises (Buschle & Meyer, 2020; Pineiro, Geppert, & Rentsch, 2020; Richter, Sufryd, & Wittfeld, 2021), and is used to dealing with them (Hooghiemstra, 2021) at both the individual and collective level.

Beyond that, social work professionals are confronted in their daily work with the consequences political decisions have on their clients.

For example, the political regulations regarding night-time curfews led to young people rioting in the Netherlands, which was condemned and severely dealt with by politicians and police. Cooperation with social work experts had not been sought in advance. This regulation seemed to be the straw that broke the camel's back for some (vulnerable) young people. Dutch youth workers spoke of this situation as a low point in their professional career (Van Dijk, 2021).

Recent studies confirm that large parts of the Swiss population were able to deal with the crisis in an effective way (Monsch et al., 2020; Steinmetz et al., 2020, Refle et al., 2020). But there are different subgroups that do not fit into this positive image and that it is, however, the socially vulnerable who have been affected to the greatest extent by the consequences of the pandemic and political regulations (Refle et al., 2020). Several studies found indications that psychic resilience has been decreasing

since the end of 2020 (Kessler & Gugenbühl, 2021), people's mental health and subjective well-being has been reduced, and vulnerable groups have been affected more than the normal average (UN, 2020, Sibley et al., 2020; Kessler & Gugenbühl, 2021; Zacher & Rudolph, 2021). Another study summarizes: 'In general, the pandemic sharpens existing inequalities. Households at the lower end of the income distribution are more affected in most dimensions – in some of them distinctly' (Martinez et al., 2021, p. 1). Moreover, various studies show that the socioeconomic status of residents determines the likelihood of being severely affected by the COVID-19 virus. People with a low socio-economic status are more exposed to the virus, have a higher chance of becoming seriously ill due to their poorer general health, and have less access to adequate care. This is also true in affluent countries with universal healthcare systems (Dragon et al., 2020; Huang 2020; Butterwegge, 2020).

In addition to the current changes and consequences of the pandemic for their clients, and therefore the professional joint working alliance, social workers also have to address the fact that they expect to face major challenges in their field of work not only now, but also in the future (Schell-Kiehl, Buschle, & Meyer, 2020). Social inequalities have become more visible due to the circumstances of the pandemic, as if being under a magnifying glass (Hildebrandt, 2021). The International Federation of Social Workers therefore speaks of a 'range of challenges' (Banks et al., 2020, p. 12) facing social work since the outbreak of the pandemic. Social work has felt the impact at the very heart of its profession, as it strives to 'promote social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people'.

Empirical data, especially concerning the situation of social work professionals during the pandemic, has up till now only been examined to a limited extent (Banks et al., 2020; Turner, 2020).

For us, this was the reason to explore the impact of COVID-19 on social work professionals and the circumstances under which professionals had to perform their work during the 2nd lockdown in autumn/winter 2020/2021 in three nations (Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands). We worked together on this aim with professional associations from the three nations in a coordinated approach.

We have examined this aim based on four dimensions:

- The impact of the political regulations on contact and communication with clients;
- The role of digital tools and technologies during the pandemic;
- Professionals' responses to the challenges in terms of innovation; and
- The impact of the pandemic on the working conditions and psychosocial risks of professionals.

The empirical data presented addresses the changes perceived by social work professionals regarding these four topics during the period of the most severe contact and hygiene restrictions during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands in the winter of 2020/2021. In this way, this article offers significant space for reflection. Even if not all developments have yet to be empirically verified, the possible theoretical references and frameworks need to be discussed in detail at a later stage.

## **Methods**

Cross-sectional data was used, collected from 7,241 social workers in Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands through an online survey. Due to cultural specificities, as well as the focus of national project partners, the questionnaires used were jointly developed and coordinated, but also contain clear country-specific aspects (Switzerland: burnout and stress, the Netherlands: use of technology, Germany: work alliance and working conditions).

To compare questionnaires, we included identical questions regarding the four dimensions in the analysis for this research: contact and communication with clients, questions on the acceptance of technology, positive changes and innovations to be maintained when restrictions are lifted and questions related to working conditions and the psychosocial risks professionals are facing.

Regarding digital tools and technologies and the response of social workers to the sudden increase in the use of technology in their daily work, we used questions on the acceptance of technology from a questionnaire based on the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) (Ebert et al., 2015). Four items in



relation to the acceptance and use of technology corresponded in the three questionnaires: knowledge, intention, organizational support and fear of making mistakes. Participants reacted on a 5-point Likert scale to four statements concerning facilitating conditions, behavioural intention, social influence and anxiety.

Questions relating to the working conditions of professionals and the psychosocial risks they face are not identical in all three surveys, though comparable. The questions of the Swiss and the Dutch survey are taken from the Swiss health survey (SARSI20a-e and SARSI 25). The items ask about psychosocial risks at work with a 5-scale response option. The response options offered in the Dutch questionnaire differ slightly from the original. The people who answered mostly or always, respectively, with agree completely and agree partly, are considered to be exposed to the surveyed risk. Another question of the Swiss survey is a valid and reliable indicator for burnout (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2014 p. 32).

In addition to the four thematic focal points mentioned above, the three questionnaires included a comparison on three demographic items: gender, age and professional position.

#### *Data collection*

All data was collected online. The German and Dutch data consisted of two online follow-ups, whereas the data from Switzerland was conducted at one moment in time. The first period of data collection was spring 2020. The German data was collected between 7 – 15 April 2020, the Dutch data between 22 April – 5 June 2020. The follow-up data in autumn 2020 for Germany and the Netherlands, respectively, was between 9 November – 6 December 2020 and 17 December 2020 – 14 February 2021. The Swiss data was collected between 10 December 2020 – 7 January 2021. In this article, we solely zoom in on the data collection of the three online surveys set up and processed during the second wave of the pandemic between November 2020 and February 2021.

The invitation to participate was distributed through the network of research units and project partners (employee representative body: ver.di, social work professional associations: SWN, avenir social, BPSW and knowledge institute: Movisie), as well

as through social media channels. To help make comparisons, descriptive statistics were analysed regarding the similarities and differences between the three countries using IBM statistics. The three samples are not representative. Exact figures regarding the number of people employed in specific fields of social work in the three countries are unknown. The following results therefore refer solely to the participants of the survey.

*Data analysis*

The sample was primarily female (75%) in all countries. Sociodemographic characteristics and descriptive values for all variables and the assessment of internal consistency were calculated using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 22.0.

*Sample*

Baseline characteristics for the sample included for analysis are shown in Table 1. Procedures for participation and notable characteristics are described below per country.

Table 1: Baseline sample characteristics

	Germany (N = 3,064)		Switzerland (N = 3,507)		The Netherlands (N = 670)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Gender</b>	*					
Male	521	17	975	27.9	80	15.6
Female	2,525	82.4	2,503	71.7	432	84
Non-binary	18	0.6	13	0.4	2	0.4
<b>Age groups (in years)</b>	**					
18 - 24	183	6.0	81	7.0	24	4.7
25 - 34	1,114	36.4	496	42.8	109	21.3
35 - 44	775	25.3	274	23.6	112	21.9
45 - 54	572	18.7	174	15.0	134	26.2
55 - 67	416	13.6	134	11.6	131	25.6
> older 68	-	-	-	-	1	0.2
<b>Position</b>	***					
Managerial position	753	24.6	835	23.8	45	6.8
Professionals of social work	2,076	76.8	2,036	58.1	471	71
Students / professionals in training positions / volunteers	116	3.8	547	15.6	20	3
Self-employed	-	-	23	0.7	-	-
Policy officer	-	-	-	-	18	2.7
Other	119	3.9	50	1.4	113	17

\*Missing values n=256  
\*\*missing values n= 259  
\*\*\* missing values n=3

### *Germany*

In Germany, social workers were not directly contacted to participate in this study. Information was spread via ver.di, the largest German trade union representing social workers, and the channels of the University of Applied Sciences Fulda. A total of 3,074 practitioners participated in the study, with 3,064 respondents included in the analysis. The survey respondents primarily came from the following spheres of activity: child and youth welfare (28.36%), early childhood education (23.6%), social work involving people with disabilities (7.96%), social work in schools (7.41%), social work in the healthcare system (4.9%), social work in the context of migration (2.64%), social work with people living in precarious situations (2.35%) or the unemployed (2.32%). A total of 69.1% of respondents stated their professional qualification was a university degree or a university of applied sciences degree in a relevant field of study, and almost one-fifth (18.9%) stated having professional training as a nursery schoolteacher. In the German survey, the emphasis lay on current changes in daily working life, modes of communication and developments in the respondents' working situations.

### *Switzerland*

Approximately 12,000 social workers were directly contacted in Switzerland through the channels of the University of Applied Sciences (FHNW) and the professional association Avenir Social. In addition, a call for participation in the survey was widely distributed via electronic media. The questionnaire was opened by a total of 6,553 people, and a total of 3,507 responses were included for analysis, as these had completed at least 80% of the questionnaire. Almost half the respondents (46.7%) stated that their professional qualification was a bachelor's degree in social work (or equivalent). A total of 18.1% completed training at a higher technical college in social work, 7.1% had another professional qualification and 6.4% a master's degree in social work from a university of applied sciences. Regarding full-time and part-time employment, 89.9% of respondents (N = 1,163) work part-time (job load: 5-98%) and 10.1% full-time. At 21.1%, the disability sector is most strongly represented among respondents. Approximately one-tenth of respondents work in children's homes (12.8%) or social welfare (9.0%). All other fields of work are represented with significantly less than 10%. The emphasis of the Swiss survey lay on the workload and health situation of the professionals.

*The Netherlands*

In the Netherlands, the call for participation in the survey was distributed through relevant social work organizations such as 'Social Work Netherlands', the professional association of social workers (BPSW) and the national knowledge institute offering a comprehensive approach to social issues (Movisie). Social workers who in the first study (spring 2020) had indicated a willingness to be contacted for further research (N = 200) were directly contacted per email to participate in this study. Moreover, a call for survey participation was widely distributed through electronic media and the network of the Saxion University of Applied Sciences. The questionnaire was opened by a total of 767 people, and 670 responses were included for analysis, as they had completed the majority of the questionnaire (516 questionnaires were fully completed). A total of 74.6% of participants had permanent employment, and 18.4% had fixed-term contracts. The emphasis of the Dutch survey was on the acceptance and use of technology and options for social innovation.

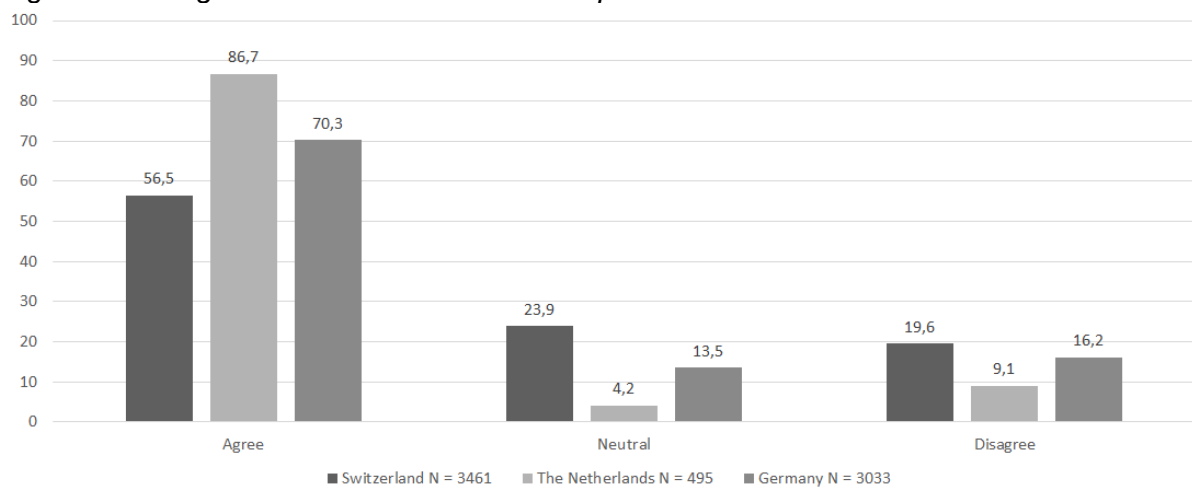
## Results

Here, we will present the findings in four dimensions:

- Changes in contact and communication with clients;
- Acceptance and use of digital technology by professionals;
- Innovation and positive aspects of the pandemic; and
- Working conditions and psychosocial risks for social work professionals.

### *Changes in contact and communication with clients*

Figure 1: *Changed method of communication professional/client*



Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on communication with clients. In all three countries, most respondents agreed with the statement 'Communication with my clients has changed since the outbreak of the pandemic.' However, compared to Switzerland the respondents from Germany and the Netherlands seem to have experienced a greater impact on the communication with their clients. This could be explained by the fact that most of the organizations in Switzerland were open during the second lockdown.

A minority of the respondents of the Swiss dataset agreed (38%) with the statement, 'Since the COVID-19 pandemic, I have had less contact with my residents/clients' (see Figure 2). The respondents in Germany and the Netherlands agreed, respectively, (53.9%) and (52.8%) with the statement. A higher percentage of respondents from Switzerland disagreed with the statement (43.4%) compared to respondents in Germany and the Netherlands.

Figure 2: *Less professional/client contact since the beginning of the pandemic*

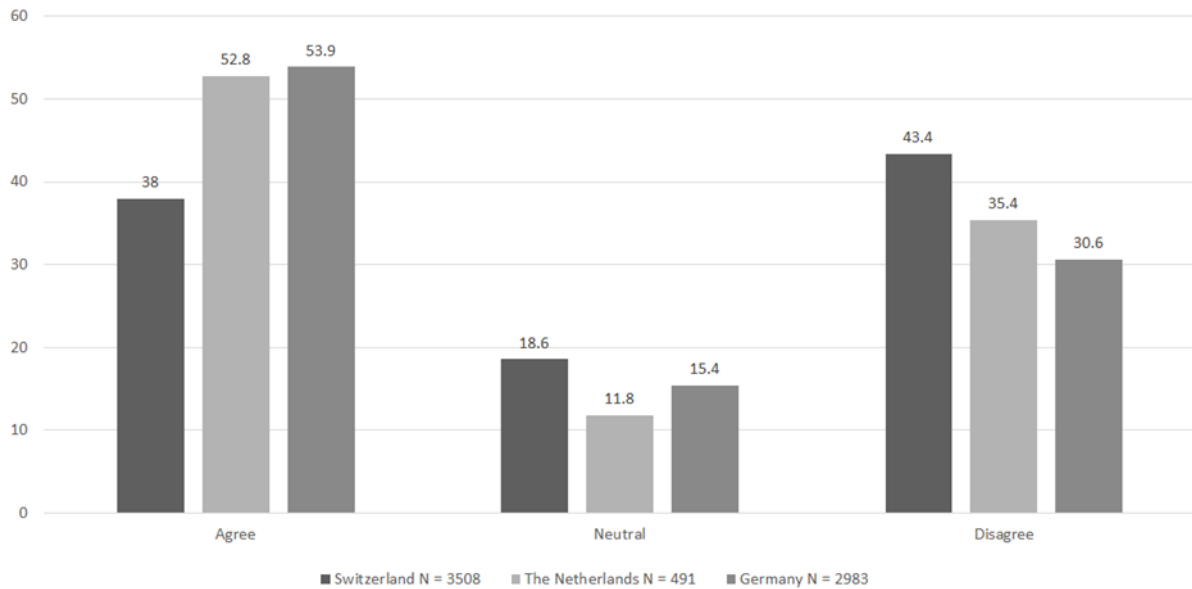
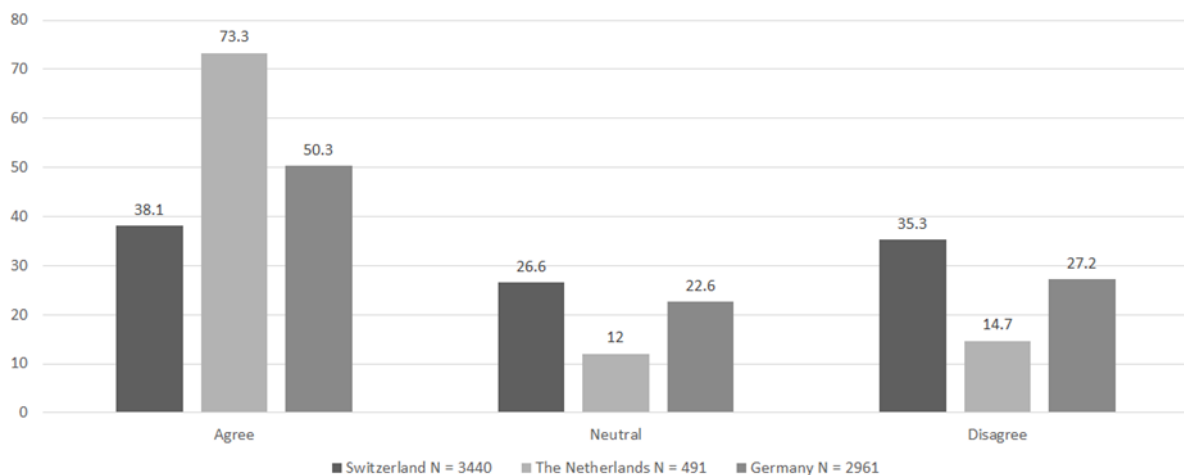


Figure 3: *The changes in contact are hampering professional work*

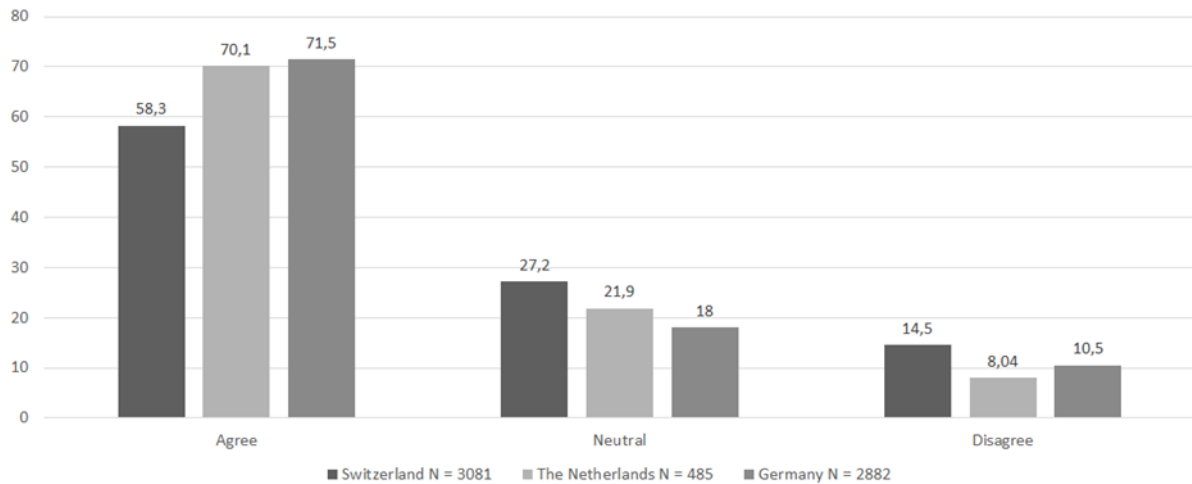


Although, there is a strong tendency in all three countries that COVID-19 has had a negative impact on communication with clients, it appears that the impact for the respondents in Switzerland is less negative compared to the German and Dutch respondents.

Besides this, in all three countries most respondents agreed with the statement, 'The problems of my clients have increased since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic' (Figure 4). Respondents in Germany (71.5%) and the Netherlands (70.1%) had almost the same percentage of agreement, while respondents in

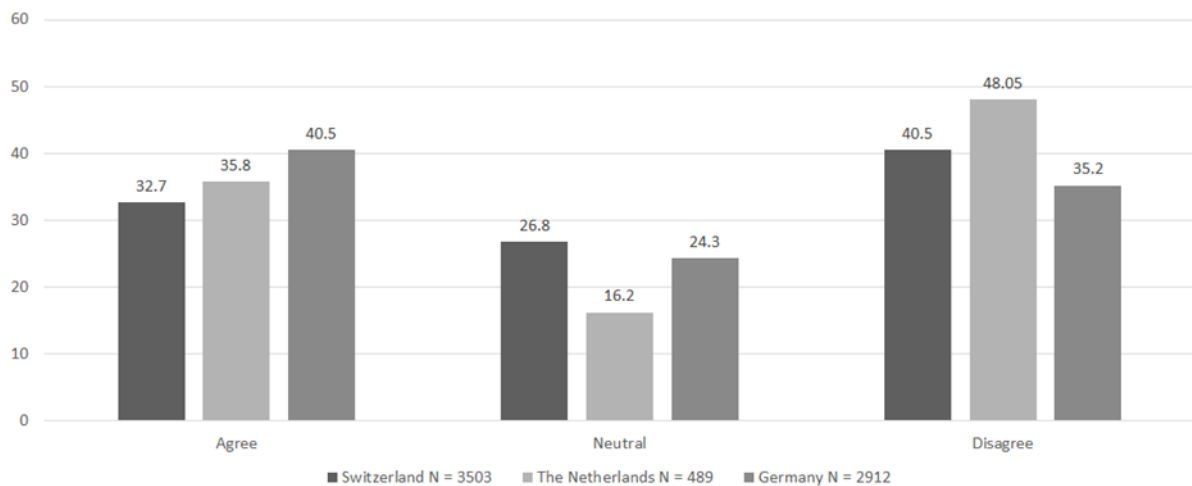
Switzerland (58.3%) agreed to a lesser extent, although the majority still agreed that problems with clients had increased. The percentage of respondents who disagreed with the statement (8.04%) was lowest in the Netherlands.

Figure 4: *Increased problems clients*



In this context, we also asked the respondents in all three countries for their assessment of the statement, 'My clients do not have the possibility to contact me digitally.' Even though many social workers in all three countries stated that their clients had the possibility to contact them digitally, more than 40% of German respondents expressed that this was not the case.

Figure 5: *The possibility of clients contacting professionals digitally*

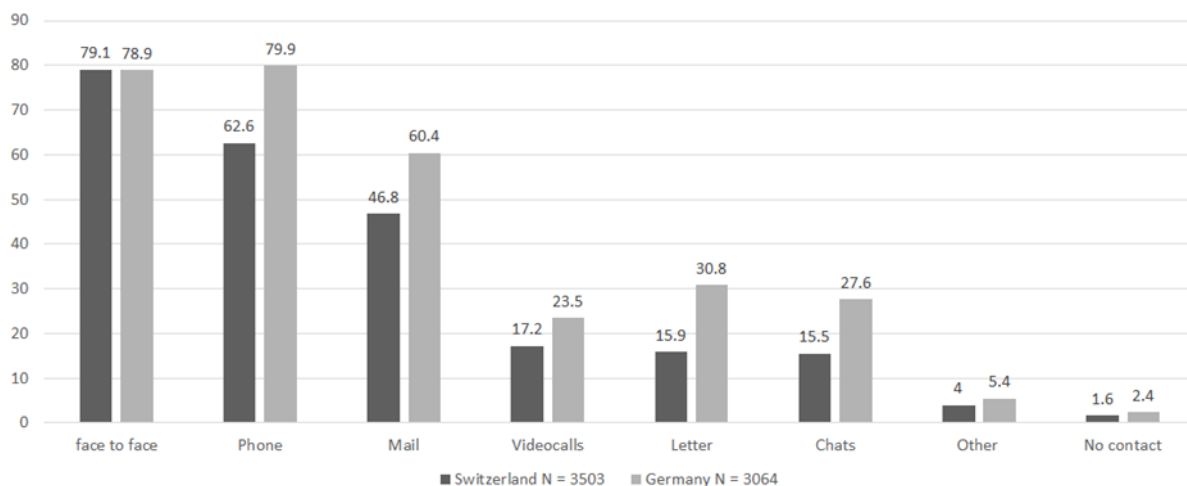


But how are the professionals trying to stay in contact with residents/clients and be meaningful to them?

The question and associated answer categories were formulated identically in the questionnaire for Switzerland and Germany. 'How do you currently contact your clients?' Multiple answers were possible.

Most respondents in Switzerland responded that face-to-face remains the most frequent way of contacting clients (79.1%), followed by phone (62.6%). In Germany, the phone was mentioned most frequently (79.9%), followed by face-to-face (78.9%). Contact by mail was mentioned more often by German respondents (60.4%) than Swiss respondents (46.8%). In both countries, less than a quarter responded to the use of video calls as a way of contacting clients (Germany 23.5% and Switzerland 17.2%). Letters and chats were more often used in Germany (30.8% and 27.6%) compared to Swiss respondents, respectively, 15.9% and 15.5%.

Figure 6: Ways of contacting clients (2nd lockdown Switzerland and Germany)

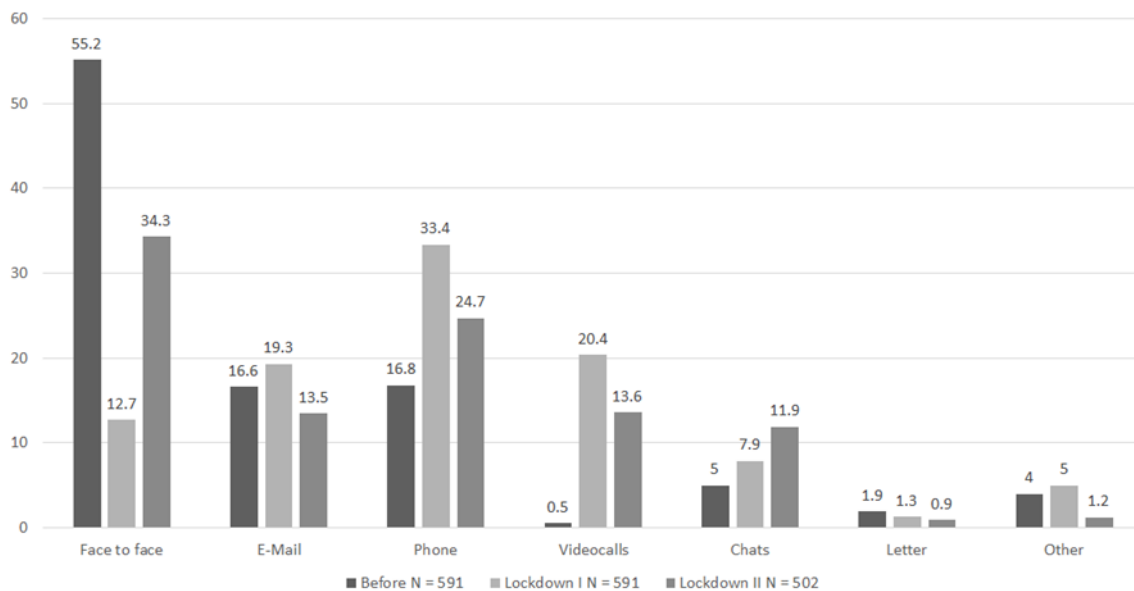


Regarding the Dutch data, the question on contact with clients was worded differently compared to the German and Swiss questionnaires. Participants who indicated that they had been in regular contact with their clients before and during the pandemic were asked to indicate their total contact time on average. The questions were: 'What percentage of your contact time did you spend before the pandemic on (...)?' and 'What percentage of your contact time do you currently spend on (...)?' The



professionals could distribute 100% of their contact time across the categories. Figure 7 shows an estimate of the spent contact time before the pandemic, during the first lockdown in spring of 2020 and the second in the winter of 2021. Since this is not a repeated measurement of the same respondents, we must be careful with interpretation, but it seems that the Dutch professionals found ways during the second lockdown period to spend some more of their contact time (within the regulations) face-to-face with residents and clients, compared to the first lockdown period, in which face-to-face contact was severely diminished.

Figure 7: Ways of contacting clients (Before, 1st and 2nd lockdown in the Netherlands)

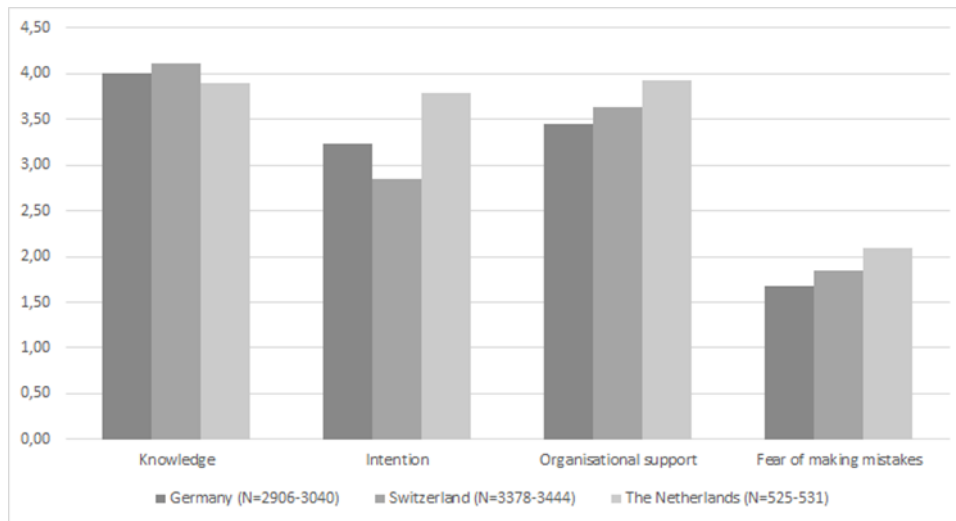


### *The acceptance and use of digital technology*

Figure 8 shows the mean scores per country on four statements regarding technology: facilitating conditions ‘I have the necessary knowledge to use technology’ (knowledge), behavioural intention: ‘I predict that I will use technology during client contact in the coming months’ (intention), social influence: ‘The management of my organization supports the use of technology’ (organizational support), and anxiety: ‘I am afraid of making irrevocable mistakes when I use technology’ (fear of making mistakes). Participants from all three countries seem to be fairly confident regarding their knowledge and regarding the use of technology, and do not seem to fear making mistakes that much. Due to restrictions on sharing data, we were unable to test for significant differences between the countries. Nevertheless, it is notable that

although participants in the Netherlands scored lowest in their knowledge on the use of technology and the highest in their fear of making mistakes; they have the highest intention to use technology in the coming months, and have the highest score on support from their organization.

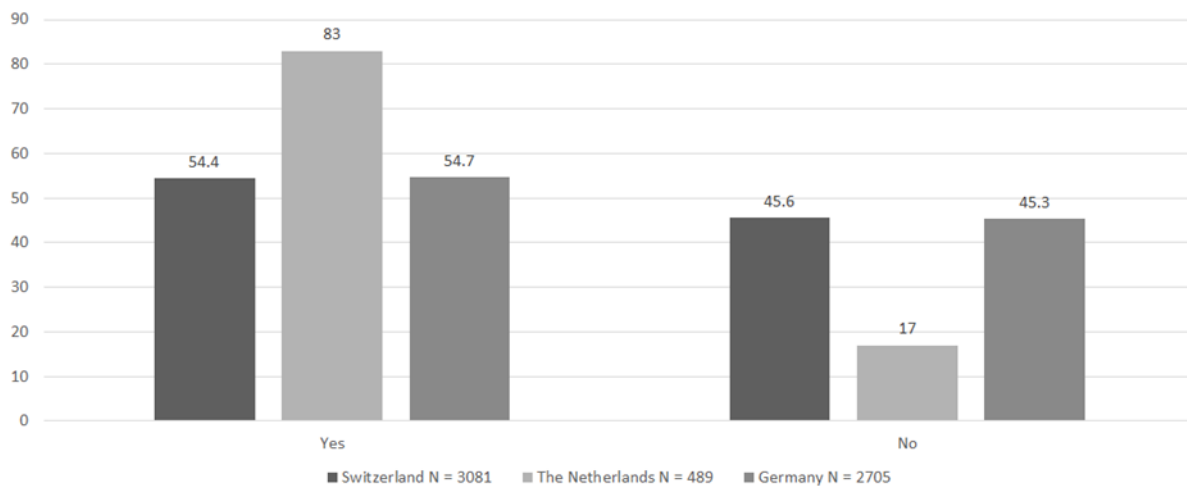
Figure 8: Mean scores on statements regarding the use of technology



*Innovation: Positive aspects of the pandemic that should be maintained*

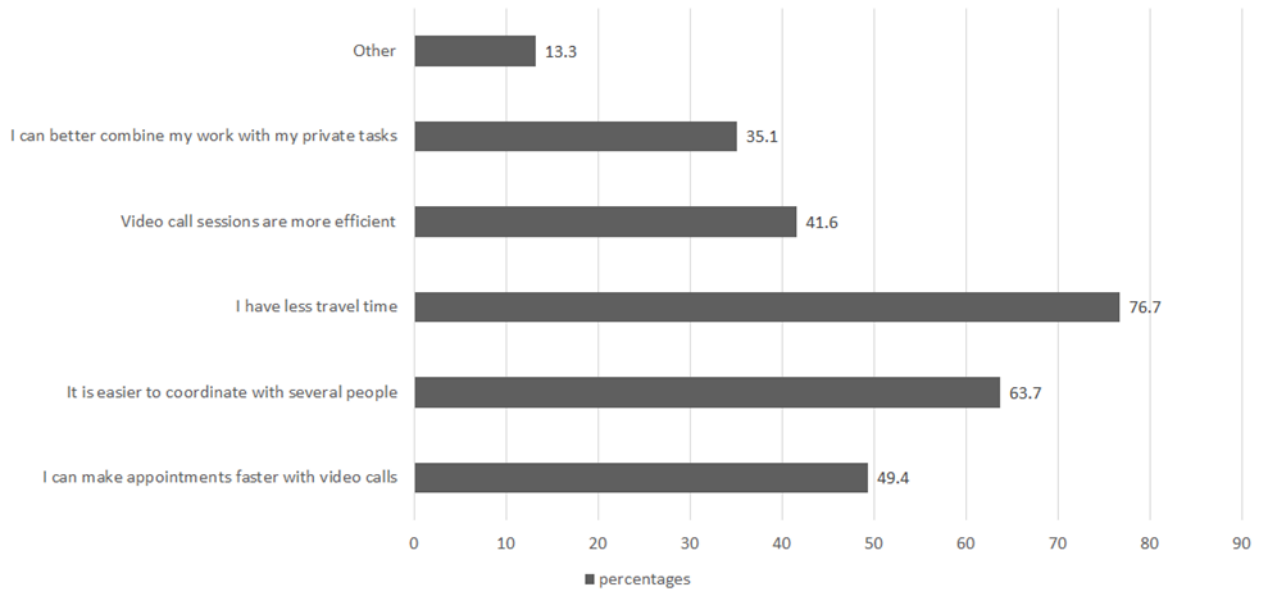
Even if there is a tendency to experience the negative impacts of COVID-19 on communication, the majority of social workers did not judge these changes as negative. In response to the question of whether there were positive changes that would be likely to be maintained, half of the respondents agreed.

Figure 9: Are there positive changes in occupational activity that professionals would like to see maintained?



Those who answered that there were positive changes were asked to name these alterations and shifts in an open text field. Figure 10 shows some closed answer categories that were included in the Dutch questionnaire (multiple answers were possible).

Figure 10: Closed answer categories from the Netherlands (N = 404): What changes does this affect?



We grouped the answers from the open question for all three countries under four topics. More analysis and interpretation of these diverse experiences is needed, but we will give a few exemplary answers for each topic:

#### Home office and digitization

Counts: Switzerland 1,179, Germany 1,179, The Netherlands 16:

'Working from home has become an option' (man, 46 years old)

'Doing the administration at home is much faster than in the office, where people come in all day long' (woman, 24 years old).

#### Hygiene

Counts: Switzerland 101, Germany 94, Netherlands 2

'I work with people who are homeless. Due to the COVID-19 regulations, everyone now has the right to protection and shelter' (woman, 23 years old)

'Working with gloves/disinfectants and a bit more personal space at the table for clients and professionals' (woman, 32 years old)

*Deceleration and mindfulness*

Counts: Switzerland 326, Germany 134, Netherlands 8

'More freedom to organize my time in a way that is more compatible with the rhythm of my life' (woman, 45 years old)

'Talks in the open air, walking' (woman, 59 years old)

*Innovation and flexibility*

Counts: Switzerland 168, Germany 272, Netherlands 32

'As a digital social work project manager, I can finally show that technology works' (man, 46 years old)

'Reaching new audiences through social media, new creative innovations in online activities' (woman, 40 years old)

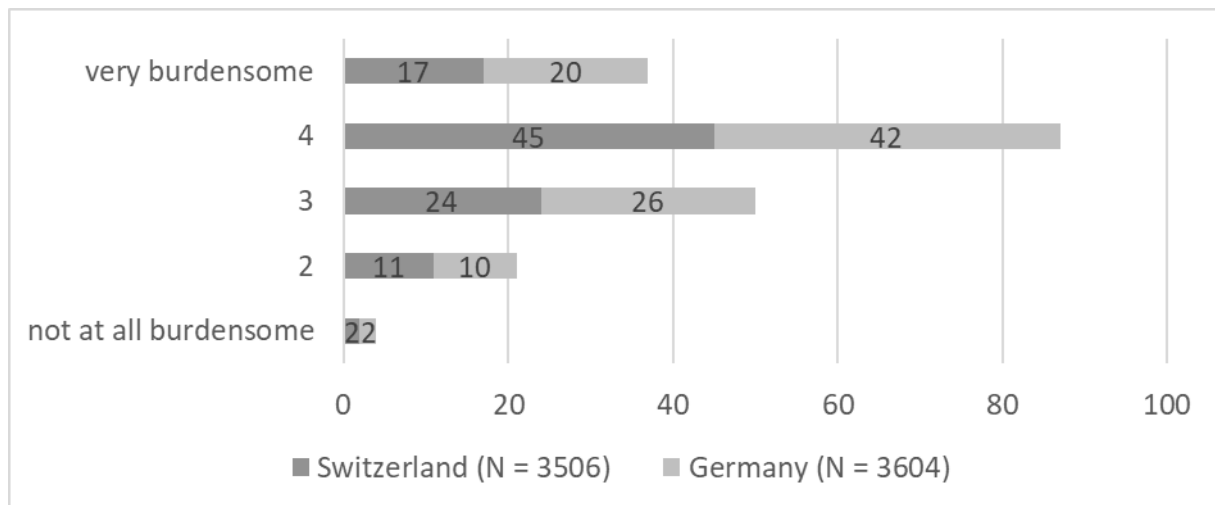
'New initiatives and working methods are emerging' (man, 41 years old)

The way professionals maintain contact with their clients, even at a distance and under difficult conditions, the handling of digital media and the related changes, such as working from home etc., paints a picture of a profession that faces the challenges of COVID-19, and attempts to cope with this crisis and its consequences for clients and the working situation with élan. In particular, the answers to the open question about changes to be maintained after the crisis, and especially those that we have grouped under the category of 'innovation and flexibility', are revealing in this respect.

*Working conditions and psychosocial risks faced by social work professionals*

Nevertheless, there are remarkable results concerning the mental health of social workers and the working conditions. Of the Swiss sample, 31.3% agree with being emotionally exhausted at work. Another 27.1% partly agree, and 41.5% disagree. This is a valid and reliable indicator for burnout. Thus, almost one-third of the respondents in the Swiss sample are affected by emotional exhaustion and therefore show a high risk of burnout, or are already experiencing a manifest burnout (BSF, 2014: 33). Even though this question was not asked in the Netherlands and Germany, a similar situation is to be expected, particularly if we consider the following results regarding working conditions. The majority of the respondents of the Swiss sample and the German sample perceive their working situation as burdensome (45.3% and 41.8%) or very burdensome (17.2% and 20.3%).

Figure 11: How burdensome do professionals find their work situation?



We found a significant correlation between the perception of the burden of the working situation and the feeling of being emotionally exhausted at work in the Swiss sample (Spearman  $R_{oh} = 0.485$   $p < 0.001$ ). Additionally, in the Swiss sample it was asked whether working conditions had changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There is evidence that respondents who are affected by changes in working conditions since the beginning of the pandemic (professionals who had to take over additional tasks from sick colleagues, for example ( $M=3.58$  and  $M=.94$ , T-Test:  $t=13.359$ ,  $df=3367.565$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) or professionals having to work more than contractually agreed ( $M=3.50$  and  $M=4.12$ , T-Test:  $t=18.396$ ,  $df=1558.567$   $p < 0.001$ ), feel more burdened on average than respondents who do not experience these changes in relation to their work ( $M=2.93$  and  $M=3.8$ ,  $T=19.818,509$ ,  $df=818-509$   $p < 0.001$ ).

Another 33.7% ( $n=3491$ ) of the Swiss agree that their working conditions have worsened since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 55.5% ( $N=3010$ ) of the German survey sample respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this question.

Regarding the German survey sample, 22.9% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the question, 'I no longer have the strength to continue working under the COVID-19-related working conditions.' The highest mean score of the burden level is under respondents who are considering a career change ( $M=4.27$  to  $M3.6$ , T-

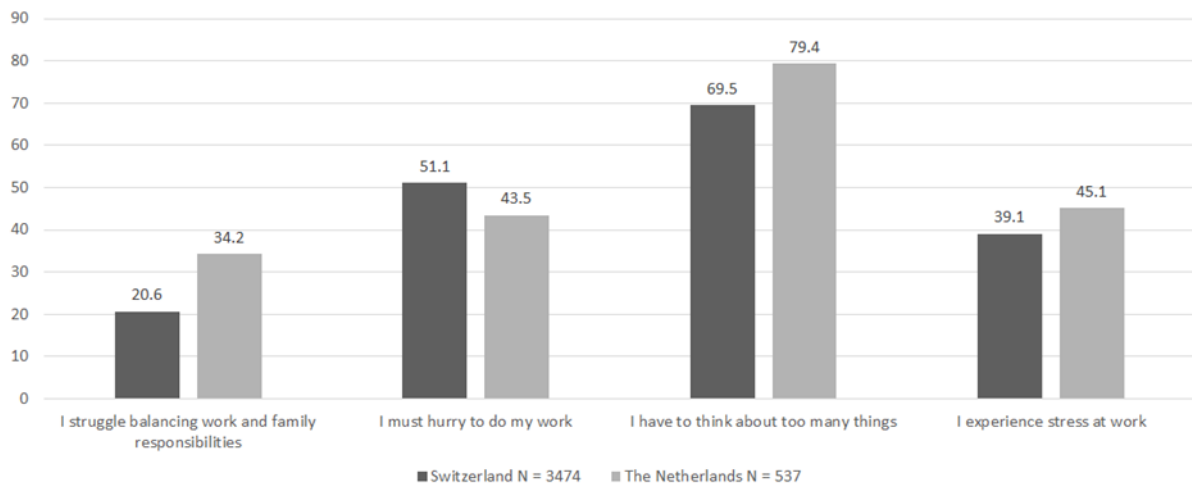
Test= -12.182 df=299,592  $p < 0.001$ ). A total of 70.8% of these professionals agree to the question about being emotionally exhausted.

If we take the family situation of the professionals in Switzerland into account, there is evidence that professionals living with children perceive their work situation as slightly less burdensome (T-Test:  $t=2.773$  df 3483,  $p= 0.006$ ,  $M= 3.58$  and  $3.67$ ) than professionals without children.

However, there are 20.6% professionals in Switzerland and 34.2% in the Netherlands who struggle to balance work and family responsibilities, which is considered as an indicator of psychosocial risk. Another risk is to work under a constant time pressure, as 43.5% of the Dutch, and more than half of the Swiss respondents indicate that they have to hurry to complete their work most of the time. Additionally, almost 80% in the Netherlands and almost 70% in Switzerland say that they have to think about too many things when they are at work. Experiencing stress at work occurs for most respondents from time to time. A total of 39.1% of Swiss respondents' experience stress at work either most of the time, or even all the time, while 45.1% of the Dutch respondents agree or even agree strongly to this question. It can be considered a positive result that 78.3% of the Dutch and 59.5% of the Swiss respondents can decide individually when they want to take a break. This could be a result of the increase in working from home, which many respondents regarded as a positive development.

The biggest psychosocial risk in both Switzerland and the Netherlands is that a majority in both countries responded positively to the statement, 'I have to think about too many things.' In the Netherlands, almost 80% (79.4%) responded to that, while in Switzerland it was almost 70% (69.5%). A small majority of Swiss respondents (51.1%) also felt, 'I must hurry to do my work', whereas in the Netherlands this was a bit lower, but even so 43.5% of respondents felt this way. The experiencing of stress at work was felt by 39.1% of Swiss respondents, and a little above that by 45.1% of Dutch respondents. The struggle of balancing work and family responsibilities compared to the other psychosocial risks was less, as 34.2% of the Dutch and 20.6% of the Swiss respondents experienced this.

Figure 12: *Psychosocial risks at the workplace*



Note: These are the answers of respondents who agreed strongly/agreed or always/mostly

## Discussion

The present study investigated the situation of social work at the time of the most severe contact and hygiene restrictions during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands in the winter of 2020/2021. The primary aim was to explore the impact of COVID-19 on social work professionals and the circumstances under which professionals had to perform their work during the 2nd lockdown in the autumn/winter of 2020/2021 in three nations (Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands).

We chose to analyse the consequences of the pandemic in four dimensions:

- the contact and communication with clients
- the use of technology within the social work profession
- the professional response to the pandemic in terms of innovation, and
- the working conditions and psychosocial risks being faced.

Our study shows three main findings:

- (a) an increase in the workload of professional social workers
- (b) the compounding of clients' problems together with a negative impact of COVID-19 on communication and contact with clients. All of this takes place

within the framework of changing working conditions and contexts. Finally, our data shows that

(c) the use of digital technology does not cause bigger problems to most of the participating social workers.

It should also be noted that professionals associate many positive aspects with technology in general. Furthermore, the fact that most respondents agree with the statement that there are positive aspects in the context of the pandemic which should be maintained indicates that social work has been massively influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our datasets give indications for the further innovation of social work regarding remote working and the acceptance and adoption of technology in this context. It seems that under the influence of the pandemic, a constructive confrontation with one's own working conditions and professional behaviour has started in all three countries. These developments open new perspectives for the profession, but can also lead to an overburdening of social work professionals, which in turn may have serious health consequences, as indicated in our data.

However, it is already clear that COVID-19 brings with it an increase in workload that cannot be borne by many professionals. This fact is accordingly reflected in the (mental) health of many social workers.

Besides these aspects, it is important for us to emphasize that the underlying structural causes during the COVID-19 crisis, such as poverty and inequality, have received little attention (Abma, 2020). Social workers could play - and are doing so - a significant role by drawing attention to injustices, advocating for changes in social policies and practices that affect the most marginalized people in society (Banks et al., 2020). 'They are concerned with the impact of social change on specific groups and the social consequences of changes that occur in specific groups' (Hooghiemstra & Van Pelt, 2020). However, there is currently a 'tyranny of the urgent' (Smith, 2019; Abma, 2020). In the current situation, social work professionals are not in great demand. Neither in the Netherlands, Germany or Switzerland are social work experts currently being appointed to political forums and advisory bodies concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. The discourse on the social consequences of the pandemic is both formulated and conducted by other professional domains. In addition, national



interests are increasingly at the forefront of COVID-19 regulations and political decisions. These pose an additional challenge for international social work (Wagner, 2020; Banks et al., 2020). The further development of knowledge and methodologies is needed to promote and tighten the politicization task of social work (Hooghiemstra & Van Pelt, 2020). These study results emphasize this need once more, not only in the three countries involved, but also in a common, international social work context.

### **Limitations**

Although this international study provides valuable insights into the impact of COVID-19 on working conditions and circumstances, and the way social workers deal with this themselves and for their clients, our findings must be considered within the context of its limitations. Firstly, participants were invited to partake in this self-reporting study through free publicity channels. Not all respondents who were invited completed the survey. The total invited sample size in Switzerland is known, but the sample size for Germany and the Netherlands is unknown, as there were multiple recruitment methods that could not be monitored. Therefore, the response rate can only be calculated for Switzerland (29.2%). Secondly, this study was conducted among a sample of three countries. There are differences in samples and exclusion criteria, as well as the demarcation field of social work, which may therefore affect the generalizability of the study results. The Dutch sample size is much smaller compared to the German and Swiss sample size. Nonetheless, the large overall size of our random sample contributed to the reliability of study results. Respondents were asked to provide basic information about themselves, though it is difficult to compare the background characteristics of the study population to a general population of social work professionals in all three countries. It is striking that in each country the research groups faced similar difficulties in estimating the number of professionals in social work.

Thirdly, the three countries had all selected their own scope (Switzerland: burnout and stress, the Netherlands: the use of technology, Germany: a work alliance among the working conditions of professionals) regarding the specific questionnaire; consequently, a full comparative analysis of these issues was not possible. A strength of this study is its versatility. Precisely due to the different emphases, a greater diversity of impact on the work of social workers is portrayed. Another

strength that should be mentioned here is that of the differences during the course of the pandemic between the lockdown measures taken in all three countries in 2020/2021. The data collection (November 2020 – January 2021) was conducted during the second lockdown. Consequently, the conditions and circumstances under which professionals were working at the time of the data collection were comparable.

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