

“But We Were All in the Same Boat Anyway”

How Factory Workers in Austria Narrate the Covid Pandemic

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Introduction

Shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe in March 2020, a public narrative emerged suggesting an imaginary collective subject (“we”) that had to “stick together” in view of the common fate of a pandemic that allegedly was affecting everyone equally. In fact, this was not the case: people under precarious material circumstances were in many ways more affected by the pandemic than those with more capital (Nolan 2021, 102). In order to “fight the virus together,” this discourse suggested there was a simple distribution of roles between people working in essential occupations on-site on the one hand and people working remotely from home on the other. Large parts of the working population were omitted in that discourse, however: people working as tilers, painters or factory workers, for example, had to continue working, in many countries, risking their lives, regardless of the fact that their services were not necessary for the maintenance of the critical infrastructure. Thus, one might assume that factory workers perceived the pandemic and its management as unjust. However, interviews with women, especially mothers, working in factories at the time of the pandemic show that the outbreak of the disease was *not* perceived and narrated as an exceptional crisis by many within this part of the population.

In this chapter, I will show that working class women in Austria recount the pandemic as an event that did not significantly affect their daily lives: at home, they had to pursue their reproductive work – and in the factory, their productive, i.e., salaried, work. The pandemic is not so much narrated as an exceptional state, but rather as a moment in which the needs of workers are in accordance with those of the companies and employers. The working mothers in my case study talk about the fact that they were relieved to be able to continue to work and found the protective measures in the factory annoying, but they also perceived them as a necessary concession towards their employers. In that sense, I argue that the hegemonic discourse

regarding the need for strong cohesion within society was taken up by these workers in a relatively direct manner.

The Hegemonic COVID-19 Pandemic Discourse: Narratives of an Exceptional Crisis

In the following, I attempt to shed light on the prevailing discourse at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that was characterized by narratives suggesting a predicament in which all people found themselves together. Setting the tone at this time were political leaders and their advisors on virological issues. For example, Christian Drosten, who became somewhat of a cult figure in the German-speaking world (Kupferschmidt 2020). “We’re all in this together” can be understood as the “linguistic hallmark,” as described by linguists Piotr Blumczynski and Steven Wilson (2023, 1), through which the first phase of the pandemic was characterized across national borders. During these months clear social roles were drawn by governments, experts and public figures: either one stayed at home and thus saved lives and one maintained critical infrastructure and therefore left one’s house for work only. Each person, the narrative suggests, had a clear role in which they would become a hero, provided one followed the rules set for that particular situation in which they found themselves.

Celebrities took up those narratives and addressed their fans and followers with glimpses of their own lives in quarantine. They acted as role models in that they depicted a creative approach to the situation in which they found themselves. Many celebrities encouraged their followers to show civic engagement by donating money or volunteering (Lookadoo et. al. 2021, 412) and frequently called for the measures to be followed. They also appealed to social cohesion (ibid., 413–415). UN Secretary-General António Guterres released a video teaser via Twitter for his report “COVID-19 and Human Rights. We are all in this together.” Although the report addresses the socio-demographic differences in the consequences for individuals, and actual and potential human rights violations during the pandemic, the discursive slogan also made it onto the title and teaser graphic of the report (UN 2020).

This discourse functioned as the backdrop of Austria’s political and discursive crisis management as well. The COVID-19 virus was first registered in Austria at the end of February 2020. On Friday, March 13, three days before the start of the first lockdown in the country, President Alexander Van der Bellen sent a nearly six-minute video announcement from the Hofburg Palace in Vienna, which was broadcasted by the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF):

Ladies and gentlemen, you all know and see it every hour on the news. The corona crisis has reached our country. It is a serious challenge for us, for our families, for our society, for our economy, for our cohesion in general. [...] Well ladies and gentlemen, I stand here today to tell you, yes, we are in a serious situation. The Corona crisis affects us all and it cuts deeply into our everyday lives. And we can all do something. [...] Ladies and gentlemen, we all have practical concerns now as well. Who will look after my child when there are no more classes? [...] What will happen to my business, my job? How will I even make ends meet? We humans have the quality and the gift to adapt quickly to sudden changes. This characteristic will also help us now and hopefully lead us out of this crisis in the shortest possible way. But it will be a big challenge for all of us, for all of us (emphasized). [...] Thank you, ladies and gentlemen who live in Austria, thank you for helping. Ladies and gentlemen, we have to go through this situation together now. And the more we stand together now, the better we work together now, the faster we will master this situation together. I am confident that we will manage this too, as we have already managed so many things together in our country. So, please take care of yourselves and together we will take care of our Austria.¹

Van der Bellen stressed the collective "we" and emphasized that "we all have worries now" and that it "will be a great challenge for all of us." He pleaded to stick together to get out of this crisis as quickly as possible. The (then) Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, announced the "Emergency Mode in Austria" [*Notbetrieb in Österreich*] on Sunday, March 15, 2020. In a speech, he thanked "all of Austria's parties" who helped making the "Emergency Mode" possible and finally addressed a few professional groups to express his gratitude:

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Austrians. We are living in a time of challenges, in a time of crisis, in a time when it is necessary to stand together. [...] We have to shut down Austria to "emergency mode" starting tomorrow. That means classes at schools will no longer take place, care will of course be provided. Businesses will remain closed, with the exception of grocery stores, pharmacies and other necessities. Events will no longer take place and mobility will also have to be restricted. This means: stay at home unless you have to go to work, run necessary errands or help other people who are in urgent need of assistance. [...] I would especially like to thank all the people who are going above and beyond in our country right now. Who are doing great things, whether in the health care system, in the police force, or all those who do their duty every day in the supermarket, in the pharmacies, or in food production.²

1 Emphasis by the author (<https://tvthek.orf.at/history/Politischer-Rueckblick/13557947/Erster-Appell-des-Bundespraesidenten/14047789>).

2 Emphasis by the author (<https://tvthek.orf.at/history/Politischer-Rueckblick/13557947/Kanzler-Kurz-verkuendet-Notbetrieb-in-Oesterreich/14047788>).

The two social groups that Kurz named in this announcement would dominate the discourse in the first weeks and months of the pandemic: those who stay at home and those who have to work in essential occupations at their workplaces. The group of workers he addresses in the speech are in sectors that are obviously necessary to maintain the critical infrastructure. The word “production” is only used in connection with food production. It seems implausible that groups whose professions are not relevant to maintain the critical infrastructure, such as those in automobile production, were simply forgotten here, given their numbers and economic importance – it seems more likely that they were deliberately not being addressed. One can only speculate about possible intentions for this omission. Presumably, however, including these groups and thereby making the concession that not only *systemrelevant* groups had to risk their health and lives by working, would have contributed, or initiated, a broad debate or even dissent.³

The regulations regarding the “interim measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19” issued on the 15th of March 2020 by the Federal Minister of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection concerned “entering the customer area of business premises of trade and service companies as well as of leisure and sports facilities for the purpose of purchasing goods or using services or leisure and sports facilities”⁴ – accordingly, the restrictions do not affect the industrial sector.

The nationwide (first) lockdown in Austria began on Monday, March 16, 2020, and applied with gradual relaxations until May 1 of the same year. Both narratives – the one about “us” who had to pull together as well as the second narrative that emerged from this, suggesting everyone was either working for the maintenance of the critical infrastructure or staying at home – were taken up and transmitted by the media. For people working at home, there were tips on ergonomics and how to deal with the fact that one’s own four walls now must function as workplace. For example, the left-liberal magazine *Der Standard* headlined “Tips for the home office in times of coronavirus. How to communicate effectively with the company from home.” It explained legal principles, gave tips for suitable office communication software and how to protect oneself against distraction and procrastination.⁵ The pub-

3 Inquiries to the Federal Ministry of Justice, the Chancellor’s Office and the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection have not shed light on the dichotomous representation and omission of those workers who did not contribute to the maintenance of the critical infrastructure. The Chancellor’s Office and the Federal Ministry of Justice each pointed out that they were not responsible for specific decisions and therefore could not provide any information. The Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection had not responded to the author’s inquiry by the time of publication.

4 https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBLA_2020_II_96/BGBLA_2020_II_96.pdfig.

5 <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000115573498/tipps-fuers-home-office-in-corona-zeit>n.

lic television station ORF aired a fifty-minute program *Am Schauplatz* on March 27, 2020, which focused on those who ensure "that vital areas of the country continue to function." Here, too, the population is depicted as divided into those who work in a system-relevant area (warehouse workers, truckdrivers for supermarket chains, supermarket workers, doctors) and those who by staying at home or in their allotment gardens take care of each other and contribute to saving lives.⁶

It can thus be stated that the political and media discourse represented a clear social dichotomy: either one is at home strictly adhering to the exit restrictions, working remotely (if gainfully employed), or one is working in an industry that contributes to the maintenance of critical infrastructure, and thus counts as a "front-line worker." In terms of public representation, the situation of factory workers was different from that of nurses and other care workers, and in general those who were now perceived as "essential workers" who suddenly became subject of intense appreciation, like when people were clapping from their balconies for healthcare workers.⁷ Due to their essential role in the crisis moment of the pandemic, workers of certain precarious and scarcely visible professional sectors became heroes of the everyday life (cf. Cook et al 2020, 75).⁸

The sociologists Antonia Kupfer and Constanze Stutz point out that while personal services were being closed on the grounds that people come into direct physical contact, governments still "refrained from lockdowns of large corporations and companies in the production sector, despite these being locations of contact" (2022, 14). People who were obliged to work and risk their lives, without being "relevant to the system" and without the attention of media,⁹ politicians, and applauding people on balconies, mostly belonged to the low-income groups and precarious class (Autor*innenkollektiv Governance, Demokratie, Solidarität 2023, 13). They were therefore often more vulnerable to the virus (Meisterhans 2022, 81), for example due to cramped living conditions. The risk of infection and the chance of survival were therefore unequally distributed in society from the beginning (Lessenich 2020, 225). But what seems particularly problematic from a public health and safety perspective is that people continued to work in factories, even if they did not have to risk their lives for essential goods (such as food production).

6 <https://tvthek.orf.at/history/Der-Alltag-mit-Corona/13557955/Ein-Land-in-Quarantaene/14047159>.

7 And there have been the subsequent discussions about how this kind of symbolic tribute was something of a mockery if it was not accompanied by improvements in working conditions and wage increases (cf. Hürtgen 2022).

8 However, this is not to negate the fact that despite the temporary (mostly discursive) recognition, no significant structural improvements in working conditions have been achieved in this sector (cf. Kreimer et al. 2023, 91–112).

9 With the exception of the meat industry in Germany, where mass infections in meatpacking plants prompted a public debate (cf. Birke 2022, 249–292).

And yet, although they were not valued or even represented in the discourse, the hegemonic narrative of “We’re in this together” also had a pacifying impact on them. on how the pandemic is perceived and told by the interviewees, as I will show in the following.

Mothers as Factory Workers Before and During the Pandemic

First, however, a short overview about the specifics of the research field in general. In my research, I am concerned with the question of how mothers who work in factories as temporary workers reconcile the productive and reproductive sphere in times of neoliberalism.¹⁰ They belong to what I call, following Andreas Reckwitz, the “precarious class” (2019, 72), that is, they have little overall capital in Bourdieu’s sense, insecure employment and poor wages. The local context of my research is the Austrian state Styria (*Steiermark*) where, the automobile industry, together with the timber industry, has long been the economic backbone (Kühberger 2011, 10). I became interested in this research field because I worked in a factory that manufactures side mirrors for cars during my first years of university. The people who worked on the assembly lines of that factory were mostly women who had very similar biographies: they had learned other professions, such as hairdresser, painter, cook/waitress, and had acquired professional certifications in these fields. When these women became mothers, a rupture occurred in their professional careers – and instead of working in the fields they had spent years being educated for, they went into the factory. This happened because jobs in the professions they had learned no longer suited their new circumstances. The most significant reasons for this were a) that the salary from working in a factory is higher than in their learned (mostly low-waged) occupation; b) that in the factory, working hours are clearly defined (shift work makes it possible to always get home on time); and c) that it is possible to work night shifts, which many of the women choose to do, especially while their children are still very young. The children are put to bed, their mothers go to work, when the child gets up, they are back home and can take care of the children and the household. This is what one of my interviewees described as “just the normal everyday life.”¹¹ However, working in a factory comes with many disadvantages that are accepted for the advantages mentioned above; there are two reciprocal factors for the precarious position of mothers who decided to work in factories. To be employed as an unskilled worker in a factory is in most cases only possible through a temporary employment agency, which

10 At the time of publication, the empirical data material consists of 19 qualitative, guided, interviews (duration between 1.5 and 3.5 hours) and a two-week research phase in a factory. The data collection phase lasted from December 2020 to August 2022.

11 Hilde Schwarnhofer, 01/21.

means less financial and job security. In general, there would be the possibility of being taken on by the company as a direct employee at some point, but this is often limited by a range of factors, such as the responsibilities tied to reproductive work.

Being a temporary worker means not to be employed directly by the company for which you work, but by an employment agency such as Randstad or Manpower. Nevertheless, as a temporary worker, one often performs the same work as workers who are contracted directly by the company that operates the factory. As a result of this classification, workers are sitting next to each other on the assembly line, performing the same manual steps, while the difference is only the contract that is underlying their work – and, therefore, the pay and job security. Most direct employees in the factory had previously been temporary workers, especially amongst the younger employees. If laborers do a good job from management's perspective, work full-time and have little sick leave, there is a chance to be taken on by the company itself. That usually means having a more secure job. The advantages and disadvantages of temporary employment vary depending on the legal basis and the actual practice in the company. Austria is noteworthy in that many rights for temporary workers have been fought for by the production trade union (*Produktionsgewerkschaft, PROGE*) over the past decades (Mendel et. al 2017).

The difference between the two forms of employment, which, as I mentioned above, usually does not equate differences in the actual everyday work, became clear at the very beginning of the pandemic. Most factories continued to produce uninterruptedly in Austria, however, in many cases the workforce was reduced through different means.¹² Many direct employees were signed up for "short-time work" (*Kurzarbeit*), i.e., replacement payments from the government, while many temporary workers were laid off (even if many of them were taken back on after some weeks). Thus, the immediate consequence was a serious difference in income: being registered for short-term work usually meant receiving up to 90% of the former salary and staying on the contract. Temporary workers who were laid off had to register as unemployed and were only entitled to receive unemployment benefit, which in Austria is 55% of the salary for the first 20 weeks and decreases after this short period of time. This highlights an underlying problematic and conflict that came to a head in the pandemic: being a temporary worker increases the degree of precarity.

Motherhood plays a great role within this precarious situation, as it restricts social mobility. Regarding the type of employment, being a mother is decisive, insofar as mothers are less likely to work full time. Hence, they are less likely to become contracted by the factory itself. If they somehow manage to become direct employees, this status can still be lost if they continue to work part-time for too long after the

12 It should be noted at this point that a frequent reason for the workforce reduction was supply shortages, not interest in infection control (cf. Kupfer, Stutz 2022, 14–15).

birth of their children.¹³ The (non-)availability of childcare is a crucial context when analyzing the intersection of production and reproduction: in Styria, only 31% of the childcare facilities offer services that are suitable for parents working full-time jobs. The others offer less than 10 hours of care per day (Statistik Austria 2022, 10). The situation is worse in the less densely populated rural areas, where most of my interviewees live, as opposed to Graz, the state's capital. Volatile support structures enabled the mothers' pre-pandemic daily waged work – neighbors, grandparents, friends who looked after the children in times when formal care was not available, especially in afternoons and during vacation season.

This structure was shaken with the outbreak of the pandemic, as options to send children to school and kindergarten were severely limited. Suddenly, parents had to home-school their children or had to deal with teenagers they could not motivate to study or could not help them properly with their homework tasks. Informal forms of care fell away due to imposed restrictions on personal contact outside the own household.

Inequalities, based on androcratic structures, that already existed before the pandemic, intensified. Mothers in general took on most of the unpaid care work during the pandemic, as several studies show. For Austria, a study documents that mothers were more likely to “voluntarily” reduce their working hours due to the repeated lockdowns (Derndorfer et. al 2021, 4) than fathers. In the terminology of feminist Marxist theory, the spheres of production and reproduction had to be renegotiated on several levels during the pandemic (cf. Federici 2020, 24). A differentiated analysis shows that the pandemic-induced changes in the relationship between reproductive and productive labor also have a class-specific component: Women with a high level of education and higher income are more likely to report that they performed more unpaid housework because of the COVID crisis. The reason for this is that activities could not be outsourced to cleaners, babysitters, and similar workers (Mader 2020). Outsourcing reproductive activities, especially within one's own household, is significantly less common (and possible) among mothers in the precarious class. This means that the pandemic-related changes were less drastic.

To summarize: being a temporary worker increases the degree of precarity in general and motherhood plays a great role within this precarious situation as it re-

13 Employees in Austria have, with minor restrictions, a legal entitlement to part-time employment at the longest until the child's 7th birthday (or any later start of school) (https://www.oesterreich.gv.at/themen/arbeit_und_pension/elternkarenz_und_elternzeit/Seite.3590004.html). In many cases, mothers who wish to remain employed part-time at the factory for longer than this time allowed by the law, are being dismissed with the option of being hired as part-time workers through a temporary agency (while performing the same work as they used to but having a more insecure form of employment).

inforces the degree of immobility within the "social space" (Bourdieu 1998, 15–23). In that sense, the mothers interviewed are confronted with a complex structure of injustice that was exacerbated during the pandemic. Accordingly, it might be assumed that those affected talk about the pandemic as a situation in which the unjust structures they have already found themselves in in pre-pandemic times aggravated. In the interviews I conducted, I first assumed that the interviewees would complain about difficulties like these, and I accordingly began to pose my questions.

(Non-)Narrations of Injustice

In the following, I try to analyze how mothers working in factories (most of them as temporary workers) during the pandemic speak about that time. The analysis is based on the ethnological method of narrative analysis of qualitative interviews. Cultural anthropologist Ove Sutter describes the specifics of a culturally oriented narrative analysis as one in which *speaking* is viewed as an *everyday action* and the socio-cultural background and the performance of speaking and the functions associated with it are included in the analysis (Sutter 2013, 83). Following Bourdieu, Sutter argues that the social location in which a speech act is performed, i.e., the capital resources the speaker has, as well as the habitual dispositions, must be considered in the analysis (ibid., 100–101). Following this model of narrative analysis, I ask what is (and what is not) represented and narrated by the interviewees and how it is represented. I will formulate interpretations on the question of the meanings of the narrative forms and narrative modes in the respective passages and thus attempt to "look at them across hegemonic discourses" (Meyer 2014, 249).

"Having Work": Maintenance of Normality

- G **We were happy. [...] Yes, it is, life actually went on normally for us, for us actually normally, really.** We didn't, except we went shopping or what, you know. But otherwise [...] They have actually taken care, there, protection. [...] Such plastic walls between the people have been installed [...] You could talk, but you didn't spit on each other or so, you know, and that, they have actually taken care. They just made sure that we kept working. That's why it went so well. // L: Ok, yes. // so they actually took care.
- L And you were glad, because you said //
- G //and normality was there too.¹⁴

14 Gerlinde Payer, 08/22.

This is an excerpt from a three-and-a-half hour conversation with Gerlinde Payer¹⁵ in August 2022. When Gerlinde (54) was 18, she completed an apprenticeship as a hairdresser and worked in this profession for several years. When her children were in their teens, she started working in a fish packing factory, a job she had to give up for health reasons. Afterwards she worked in a supermarket for a short period of time as a semi-skilled worker. For about ten years now, she has been working in a parquet flooring factory. Gerlinde told me that at the beginning of the COVID-pandemic, she was neither laid off nor put on short-time work. She continued to work without interruption, which she found pleasant because life “actually went on normally,”¹⁶ as she put it. When I asked directly what having to continue producing during the pandemic was like for her, even though they were not actually part of any “critical” infrastructure, she did not address what I was implying, but rather talked about how she was worried that the demand situation at her workplace would weaken. Rather surprised, Gerlinde then reported that the order situation remained stable due to the fact that many private individuals laid new floors in their homes, during the first phase of the pandemic. Gerlinde’s answer, which is representative of other similar answers here, surprised me to a certain extent, since I had assumed that the interviewees would express dissatisfaction or even complain about the situation in some way. This, however, is not Gerlinde’s focus: she is mainly concerned about having and keeping this job. The next interview sequence from an interview with Jana Gross is similar to Gerlinde’s:

L [...] Was that an issue then, so that you have to produce during the pandemic, for example, although actually cars could be dispensed?

J No, was not an issue.

L Was not at all?

J No.

L Were people rather happy//

J //Yes, that they have a job. Well, that wasn't a topic at all. I just never thought about that before*laughs*. Yes, I mean, there was short-time work in the meantime. Some were laid off for one or two months and then rehired. [...] There was short time work once, but that didn't really affect us part-timers anyway, it was only for the full-time employees. [...] **But otherwise, actually, no, I was glad that I could go to work, yes.**¹⁷

Jana graduated from high school in 2015 and went on to study at a university. She dropped out of her studies and started a training as a massage therapist. Until her

15 The names of all interviewees are pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity.

16 Ibid.

17 Jana Gross, 08/22.

pregnancy, she worked in a hotel as a masseuse. She had her first child a few months before the pandemic and started working during the night shift in a car parts plant eleven months after giving birth. The reason for her relatively early return to work was that she and her partner took out a loan to build a house and one of the bank's conditions for obtaining the loan was that Jana had an income. She described the household income at the time of the interview in August 2022 as just about sufficient for their everyday life and that they are already far away from "saving something away." After an hour and a half of talking, I asked Jana what working during the pandemic was like for her. She first described that it was exhausting to work with the mouth-nose-protection mask and how the measures at the workplace were not very useful. I then asked if they had discussed within the staff that they had to produce during the pandemic. She answered that it was not an issue at all for her and her colleagues and that she had never thought about this matter. While she found the measures in the factory annoying, the most important aspect of her narrative regarding working during the pandemic, as for Gerlinde, seems to be that she *had* work.

These passages indicate that workers perceived the fact that they could continue to go to work as positive. Instead of complaining about having to continue to produce during a pandemic in which large parts of the population did not have to risk their health through working, as I was expecting, they expressed their satisfaction about being able to be continuing working and thus experienced a certain maintenance of "normality." Accordingly, the hegemonic discourse is not contradicted, rather it is taken up and adapted to one's own reality. It manifests the attitude towards gainful employment, which can be understood as shaped by hegemonic structures, as part of a *common sense* [*Alltagsverstand*], as Sutter, following Antonio Gramsci, describes it (2016, 55–57). An incorporated interest in maintaining work can be identified, as this is a way of maintaining "normality," i.e., the everyday life.

Reporting Reproductive and Care Work

- L This first phase, at home, with school care, how was that?
J Yes, they were at home then anyway.
L That's when you had to look after everything.
J Mhm.
L What was that like?
J Exhausting, looking after everything (nochischaun), they did quite a lot online anyway. She [daughter] is well behaved, actually. But the little one [son], always wants to go to her [when she was studying]. And well, keeping him busy.
L So keep him busy?

J Exactly, exactly. You almost can't go out, then she wants to go out too. That's tough.¹⁸

As described above, childcare had to be reorganized during the pandemic. Especially at the beginning, when public care was massively restricted, it was even more difficult for many workers to juggle gainful employment with reproductive and care work. However, when I asked Judith Moser how she experienced the time of home schooling with her children during the pandemic, she simply answered: "Well, they were at home then." I asked if she then had to look after everything (*nochischauen*) she only answered "Mhm." I asked her again "What was that like?" and only then she very briefly described how she experienced the beginning of the pandemic in terms of childcare. Neither having to work during the pandemic nor having to handle school chaperoning for their children seems to be perceived as an exceptional challenge.

When asking my interviewees about the role of the fathers of their joint children was, I felt like they found my question somewhat odd. When, for example, I asked Lena Schwaiger about the role of her ex-husband, she answered: "Pff... that doesn't concern him at all."¹⁹ She then explained that she has asked her ex-husband if he could take care for their two children for one more day per week during the first lockdown because of the difficult situation she was in (normally he sees them every second weekend for two days). But he just said that Lena also did not care how he struggles during this crisis. Due to the challenging time of repeated lockdowns, their conflicts came to a head and even ended in a lawsuit about alimony payments. This, of course, also meant that she again had to deal with an additional mental load during this time.

Judith and Lena responded to my question about childcare during the first lockdown by answering briefly. Clearly, the interviewees could have told me more about the multiple forms of stress. It took several inquiries on my part to hear how the initial period of the pandemic was organized and what role their partners played in it. This does not correspond to their way of speaking in the entire interview: both narrate in a detailed fashion in other passages.

According to Silke Meyer, meanings can be deduced from non-narratives such as these (2014, 249). In the sections presented above, they resort to "reporting" rather than "narrating," i.e., they summarize their experience in a condensed and abstracted form (Lehmann 1983, 34). This mode of speaking thus indicates the implicitness with which these working mothers look at the challenges between gainful employment and childcare. The omissions in their narrations about the pandemic, one could argue, point to the fact that they did not actually perceive the pandemic

18 Judith Moser, 08/22.

19 Lena Schwaiger, 04/22.

as an exceptional crisis. Lena even reported that she had felt "locked in" before the pandemic: "I just went to work and was at home."²⁰

To conclude and state it in a somewhat exaggerated manner: since the interviewees already experienced a life before the pandemic that was so strongly characterized by the pressures of productive and reproductive work, they seem to have felt like little had changed in their everyday lives. While the daily life of the interviewees was in some ways marked by the measures "from above," the crisis was not perceived as exceptional. Also, this pandemic crisis seemed to affect many of the interviewees less than other crises that have determined their biographies. Such statements about everyday life during the pandemic as *not* particularly extraordinary point to a more general problematic that Anne Seeck has discussed – for many people, the experience of being restricted from participating in public life is not an exception:

They are used to sitting isolated in their apartments and being excluded from social life. For them, going outside has always meant having to spend money they do not have. Many of the things that middle-class people sorely miss in Corona times are not possible for the income-poor in their normal, everyday lives, such as travel, visits to restaurants, expensive concerts and sports classes. (Seeck 2020, 86; author's translation)²¹

In the case of the field studied in this article, it can be added that a decisive factor for being isolated is the overall workload in terms of time between gainful employment and reproductive work. The perception of restrictions on everyday life due to the pandemic seems to be dependent on the class structure and the gendered division of labor.

"It has happened to everyone the same way"

The narrative modes used by the interviewees point to the fact that the additional burdens such as health risks or home schooling during the pandemic are often not seen as exceptional. The fact that they had to work during the pandemic seems to be perceived more as damage or threat (losing one's own job) averted than as an expression of structural inequality, or a manifest contradiction to the hegemonic discourse (home office vs systems-relevant jobs). I contend that my interview partners primarily took up the framings of "being in it together" from hegemonic discourse,

20 Lena Schwaiger, 04/22.

21 Stephan Lessenich refers to the same circumstance, focusing on the global context: "What have always been self-evident privations for four-fifths of the world's population [...] became real with corona, at least for a brief historical moment, also for the top fifth of the world's social structure" (Lessenich 2020, 218);author's translation).

thereby taking a non-oppositional and even anti-oppositional stance, especially towards their employers.

When, for example, I asked Judith what having to go to work was like for her when, after all, the production of auto parts was not essential to maintaining critical infrastructure, she expresses her satisfaction with the handling during the early phase of the pandemic:

“Well, I don’t know, but I must say, it suited me quite well. Because school and that then started again anyway and then it is okay anyway. But otherwise [...] if I’m afraid of it [the Covid virus], then it’s something else, then I have to look anyway, but everyone gets it anyway. [...] **No, that’s fine the way it was.**”²²

Judith Moser works in a car parts factory, part-time on the night shift. Her partner and her father, both craftsmen, had to work throughout the pandemic and had more work than before because people at home had started to renovate their homes. When I asked what she thought of the fact that her family members and herself had to continue working, she, like other interviewees dismissed my question and did not elaborate on it. She did not answer my question about health risk and (as I saw it) the non-necessity to produce cars during the pandemic and answered, “Well, I don’t know [...] it suited me quite well.” She followed up with reflections that revolved around childcare and concluded her answer similarly to how she began, “No, that’s fine the way it was.” Similar forms of not complaining during the pandemic are used by many interviewees.

L What was working like then during the pandemic?

A **Well, we continued to produce as before, thank God.** Ah, just, of course, you had to wear a mask. Ah, you had to test yourself. [...] Then you had a certificate, ah, on your cell phone. **So, you may enter, you may go to work.** [...] **And, so, attention was paid somehow.**²³

Anna Gruber, a full-time temporary worker at an automotive supplier, expresses gratitude that she was able to continue working and emphasizes that “attention was paid somehow” (*also da wurde schon geschaut*) to ensure that certain safety measures were followed. This can be read as a favorable remark that the factory had done something right during the pandemic. In a similar way, Jana first explained that the measures at her workplace did not offer any reliable protection, but stated quickly afterwards that those responsible could not have done more to protect the workers.

22 Judith Moser, 08/22.

23 Anna Gruber, 07/22.

- L Did you feel well protected in general?
- J [...] **That in the company, that was stupid**, because when we chatted, we just leaned forward in such a way that we talked past the security glass, because otherwise you didn't understand anything anyway, and at the seat you just don't have it [mask], where you sit next to each other for eight hours, and in the aisle, where I pass by I have to put it on. **It is not logical, it was actually moronic. Well protected, no** [...]. It was definitely, they, just the usual things. Disinfect hands, wash hands often, put on the mask as well as possible [...] **They did what they were told to do, and I don't see what else you could have done more.**²⁴

The statements like "attention was paid," "I don't know what you could have done more," "[w]ell, that's fine the way it was" indicate a shoulder-to-shoulder relationship between employers and employees during the pandemic that is worth paying attention to. The passages presented can be interpreted as a non- and even anti-oppositional stance towards the employers or "those up there": the interviewees look approvingly at the factory's pandemic management, which gives them work and to a certain extent "normalizes" the global state of emergency. The anti-oppositional stance is accompanied by the frequent use of deictic forms, such as the pronoun "they" which partly leaves unclear who exactly is meant in the passages.

This conciliatory view of the employment relationship seems to have been influenced specifically by the pandemic and the ways in which it was made sense of discursively. While in other parts of the interviews, employers or "those up there" are clearly categorized as "others" who are generally not viewed favorably, the pandemic narrations are dominated by an imagery of employees and employers standing shoulder to shoulder. The discourse of "we're all in this together" is to some extent shared or even echoed by the interviewees. Quite clearly, for example, Jana explains that it was tedious for her to work with a mask, but at the same time, she emphasizes that it was probably the same for everyone:

"[...] **It was just annoying with the mask.** It's really annoying, it's so stuffy inside, in the hall, and then you have to it out somewhere all the time, when you just quickly go over, carry a box over. That really bothered me. **But it was the same for everyone anyway**, I don't think there was almost anywhere where they didn't have them."²⁵

The narrated satisfaction, or the non-, i.e., anti-oppositional stance, seems to be related to the hegemonic discourse suggesting that "everyone" had concerns about

24 Jana Gross, 08/22.

25 Jana Gross, 08/22.

work and childcare (including related financial issues) during this time. The employers, large production companies, also made use of the narrative of being in this crisis “together,” for which the political and media discourse had paved a way. For example, an international company with several production locations in Styria reports on the website about the good pandemic management from 2020 as well as currently completed measures with the title “COVID-19 measures: Together, Safe & Healthy.” Under one article of the regional newspaper *Kleine Zeitung*, which reports the temporary production stop due to COVID-19 of a local car factory, there was a debate among readers in the comments column discussing employees’ rights due to factory closures. One comment of a worker of the factory the article was about first describes the potential labor rights violations that might occur – but concludes the comment with “[b]ut in times like these, we just have to show solidarity.” In this case, showing solidarity meant not causing the employer any trouble regarding labor law violations or making any kind of demands.

Conclusion

The article was an attempt to show how factory workers in Austria narrate the COVID-19 pandemic. Although they had to work during the pandemic and were thus exposed to a high health risk, they did not perceive the pandemic as reinforcing their (precarious) pre-pandemic situation. There was rather gratitude that the factories mostly remained open and only in some cases a complete production stop was imposed. Often, the discourse of “togetherness” was taken up and the issues of potential labor rights violations and health risks tended to be left aside – what seemed to be more important was the preservation of the fragile system in which the workers find themselves in. Since this system was not significantly shaken, i.e., the interviewees could still make ends meet and childcare was somehow mastered despite the difficult circumstances, the COVID crisis has apparently not been perceived and therefore narrated as an extraordinary crisis. The interview passages and media material presented indicate that the discourse following the “we’re all in this together” paradigm has influenced perceptions and corresponding narratives about the pandemic. Solidarity with the employer was expressed, rather than discontent about the pandemic management. Potential labor rights violations were seen as lower priority. Questions about vaccination were not addressed in the interviews (this presumably would have elicited other narratives). However, the focus on the productive and reproductive sphere seems to expose interesting aspects from the precarious class that often remain unconsidered, as the COVID-19 pandemic was perceived and narrated as a non-exceptional crisis.

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