

Formalizing unpaid and unrecognized care: Experiences of caregivers and arising implications in Austria

Informal care represents an indispensable pillar of long-term care provision. Estimates suggest that around 80% of all long-term care in Europe is delivered by informal caregivers (Hoffmann & Rodrigues, 2010). Due to ageing societies and cutbacks in the provision of professional care, the importance of informal care is expected to increase (Colombo et al., 2011; Kaschowitz & Brand, 2016; Swinkels et al., 2016).

Informal care can be defined as ‘care provided to older and dependent persons by a person with whom they have a social relationship’ (Broese van Groenou & De Boer, 2016). Despite its essential contribution to long-term care provision, informal care tends to remain unrecognized work: It takes place in the private sphere and is thus characterized by low societal visibility. Moreover, it is provided without contractual agreements and formal remuneration in most cases. This leaves caregivers in a situation with no regular income and frequently forces them to combine informal care work with paid employment (Carmichael & Charles, 2003). These conditions contribute to the fact that caregiving activities are associated with negative effects on the physical and mental health and quality of life of informal caregivers (Cohen et al., 2019). This disproportionately affects women, since unpaid care is to a large extent provided by daughters (in law), wives and mothers (Hoffmann & Rodrigues, 2010).

In order to support caregiving activities different payment arrangements have been introduced across various welfare regimes (European Commission 2018). Caregivers might, for instance, receive indirect payments in the form of cash-for-care-benefits that are transferred to them by the relative they care for (‘routed wages’) or obtain direct compensation in the form of care allowances paid through social security and tax systems (Ungerson, 1997). While these benefits might generate some income for caregivers, they do not guarantee the establishment of a formal employment relation and thus do not imply a formalization of care.

The recently introduced pilot projects ‘Förderungen der Betreuung von Pflegebedürftigen durch Angehörige’ and ‘Anstellung betreuender Angehöriger’ in the Austrian regions Burgenland and Upper Austria offer formal employment to individuals who care for dependent family members (e.g. elderly persons or persons with disabilities) and grant access to social security, paid holidays and sick leave. Thereby, care provided by relatives within private households becomes paid and formalized work. The aim of these initiatives is not only to enable persons in need of care to continue living at their homes, but also to improve the situation of caregivers by securing their livelihood. Moreover, given the current shortage of both formal and informal long-term care, the programmes aspire to create additional staff for elderly and disability care by offering trainings and education for caregiving family members.

While the impact of providing informal care on caregiver’s health, wellbeing, employment and life satisfaction has been extensively discussed in academic literature (e.g. Skinner & Sogstad, 2022; Kaschowitz & Brandt, 2016; Bauer, 2015), research on the implications of the formalization of previously informal care for individuals who care for dependent relatives remains scarce. Considering that the formalization of family care through the employment of caregivers represents a rather rare and novel approach to the organization of care, this research gap does not come surprising. Nevertheless, it is crucial to shed light on the impacts arising

from formal employment of caregiving relatives – not least, because informal care givers are an essential resource for long-term care provision, which renders the safeguard of their wellbeing and care providing capacities vital. Moreover, given that informal caregiving responsibilities are unequally distributed (Lee & Tang 2015), researching the consequences of this particular care arrangement is important from a gender perspective.

For this reason, this paper aims to explore how informal caregivers experience a formalization of their formerly unpaid and unrecognized work by drawing on the two pilot projects in the Austrian regional states Burgenland and Oberösterreich as case studies. Following from that, it evaluates in how far these programmes have the potential to improve the situation and recognition of family caregivers in domestic settings. In order to generate insights on this matter, six interviews are being conducted with caring relatives participating in one of the programmes. These are complemented with three expert interviews.

The results of this study will be presented in Track #5: Hegemonie in Arbeit und Wohlfahrtsstaat.