

/ Gender, Diversity and Social Cohesion in Europe – Editorial

The European Union (EU) has proven to be largely incapable of action as a unitary actor in the global pandemic and it was far from being a solidary union before the start of the war in Ukraine: The Schengen Agreement was suspended, the means of the internal market were interrupted, and—as if overnight— borders were closed by national heads of government. Contrary to all rules of the common market, medical material was confiscated at borders. The EU and its ability to act was disjointed like never before in the post Second World War period. The pandemic has not only affected the political foundations of the EU, but moreover transformed the lives of many citizens throughout the larger continent of Europe. This becomes evident when looking at issues like gender, diversity and social cohesion, in which the pandemic has acted as a catalyst that intensifies already existing developments: Heterosexual couples with children rely on women's unpaid work once more for home-schooling and care work; loss of paid work, longer periods of lockdowns or lay-offs have led to financial and psychological problems of adults, youth and children; digitalization of the workplace and home-office have shifted working environments further into the private household, deluding further boundaries of paid and unpaid work; aspects of gender and diversity are often put back due to seemingly 'more important' issues. At the same time LGBTIQ* and reproductive rights are diminished in specific member states of the EU in the shadow of the pandemic.

These developments show that concepts of diversity and equality are only meaningful if they lead to equal legal rights, a recognition of differing social backgrounds or income, and related minority rights as highlighted in intersectionality studies. Having just left behind the global financial and economic crisis post-2008, questions of social cohesion will be important in the political as well as the economic approach in combatting the pandemic and its effects in Europe, the European Union, and internationally.

This special issue therefore sheds light on different dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of gender, diversity and social cohesion within the EU.

The first article “The pandemic – no end in sight?” by *Nadja Meisterhans* gives insights into a politically engineered ‘catastrophe’ and argues that COVID-19 is not a natural disaster. The COVID-19 pandemic and crisis is moreover a global phenomenon and an expression of a lack of global solidarity and a glaring political failure – at the national, EU, broader European and global level. The pandemic shows that diseases do not stop at national borders and the global dimension of these phenomena have to be taken into account. Meisterhans criticizes that the social, economic and political determinants are hardly taken into account in the current discourse surrounding health. She argues that structural causes and effects of the global health crisis have been neglected and this development is not new. The fading out of the structural causes of multiple and interconnected crises is one of the main reasons why the pandemic exacerbates intersectional inequalities and power asymmetries and why structurally disadvantaged social groups, both in the Global North and the Global South, are abandoned by populist governments in an almost necropolitical manner and sometimes even rely on politically created scapegoats. In the final part of her contribution, she sketches out contours of a critical global governance for health in a decolonial and transformative perspective, which could be applied as a counterfactual and critical angle in post-pandemic times.

In the second article, *Carina Maier* focuses on transnational gendered (care) labor relations and takes an analytical perspective from migrant live-in care workers' political struggles. She analyzes the working and living con-

ditions of migrant live-in care workers in Austria from an intersectional (queer) feminist economic and ideological critical point of view. This perspective enables a focus on specific precarious working conditions, and the permanent crisis of care more generally, which is visible and invisible. She shows that in the live-in model the ideal of care as familial is enforced and manifested through ethnicization and naturalization. There is a complex relationship between transnational care work and (national) state institutions, which must be analyzed and understood in the context of transnational social inequality. Maier's feminist critique of this system-inherent invisibility, devaluation, and distribution of care work is linked to elements of care that emphasize the embodied dependencies and relationships and thereby directs attention to an often-hidden solidarity between those who care and those who are cared for. In a time when many work processes were shifted into the digital space, care work still depended upon human interaction. This was crucial for work relations in the paid and unpaid care sector, and it increased the pressure on those working in hospitals or as care workers in private households. The pandemic has shown that a digitalization of work is only possible in certain sectors of (paid) work.

Simultaneously, many sectors were greatly affected by the shift into digital space due to the pandemic. However, digital technologies are not a neutral space of action, but reflect existing power relations and therefore can reproduce inequalities in private life, in companies and in social structures. *Astrid Schlögl* and *Christian Berger* therefore focus on digitalization in times of crisis and its effects on employee interest groups in their contribution. They highlight that workforce representatives and employees have to take these power relations into account and find resolutions to those new challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has boosted digitalization and a large part of both professional and private life has moved into digital space. Berger and Schlögl argue that this shift led to different challenges for employee interest groups, and it is necessary to analyze those changes that (can) mean power shifts at different levels. They show that employee representatives tend to deal reactively with digital technologies and their labor or socio-political implications, since technology use is strongly influenced by employer interests. Moreover, the digital innovation of the past pandemic years led to power shifts from workers towards fractions of capital and from public to private. This holds true for the gendered division of labor, and the concentration of power and capital in information and communication technology companies. In their contribution, the authors argue that in order to represent the interests of workers, technological change must be viewed as a social process in which digital innovation functions (also) as a political instrument in the interests of the powerful; thus, the relationship between private/public, market/state is changing, and appropriate responses need to be found.

These above mentioned shifts in the digital space did not only occur in the working environment but moreover affected all areas of life. Therefore, the pandemic offers a glimpse into the strengths and weaknesses of our social fabric across the European Union and beyond. In this context, *Julia Obermayr* and *Yvonne Völkl* tackle 'Corona Fictions as Cultural Indicators of Social Cohesion and Resilience in the Wake of the Covid-19 pandemic'. They argue that the understanding of cohesion among member states in the European Union and Europe more broadly has suffered an essential rupture due to increasing fears of illness and decreasing feelings of belonging to a nation state. While women and marginalized groups such as migrants have suffered many additional disadvantages in their everyday lives, Corona Fictions, i.e. cultural and literary productions like movies emerging during the current pandemic, have demonstrated their potential to represent togetherness and – a sometimes even utopian appearing – social cohesion. The contribution shows that Corona Fictions function as a coping strategy that helps to deal with stress and challenges of the pandemic and strengthens resilience. In this context, cultural productions such as movies function as an enabler of social cohesion, fostering mutual understanding and a feeling of togetherness, particularly when considering narratives on the internet or in literary anthologies regarding their participatory nature.

We hope that this Special Issue will shed light on some of the multiple aspects of the global pandemic and thank the readers for their interest as well as the authors for their insightful contributions. We as editors particularly thank our new managing editor, Philipp, and our copy editor Astrid, for the proof reading and thank Susanne Gusenbauer for our final layout. We wish inspiring reading!

Stefanie Wöhl and Michael Hunklinger, Vienna and Krems, July 2022

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