



# "I initially thought I could do it while working my normal hours": informal caregiving and employment in (Upper) Austria\*

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## Introduction

Informal carers look after people who need care, support or assistance in their immediate environment, such as elderly, disabled or seriously ill family members or friends. Informal carers—in many cases women—cover a large proportion of existing care needs. It is estimated that in the European Union, over 80% of care and support is provided by informal carers (Hoffmann & Rodrigues, 2010). For Austria, it is estimated that a total of around 947,000 people of adult age care for family members, of whom around 30% to 40% are employed (Nagl-Cupal et al., 2018).<sup>1</sup>

International studies have shown that informal caregiving can have a negative impact on working life and can lead to an unwanted reduction in working hours and corresponding loss of income or even to the termination of employment relationships due to a lack of compatibility (e.g. Bauer & Souza-Poza, 2015; Burch et al., 2019; Spann et al., 2020). It is known that the combination of caregiving and working poses a major time and psychological challenge for many people in Austria, too (Mairhuber & Sardadvar, 2017; Sardadvar & Mairhuber, 2018). Nevertheless, no empirical study has been conducted to date that comprehensively analyses the specific situation of informal carers in gainful employment.

This policy brief provides information on selected results of the research project "Informal Care and Employment in (Upper) Austria: Initial Situation and Need for Action," which was carried out by the European Centre for Welfare Policy and

<sup>1</sup> As Nagl-Cupal et al. (2018) only consider family members of care allowance recipients and only the respective main carer, this is a conservative estimate. In addition, some adolescents and children are already taking on the role of informal carers (Nagl-Cupal et al., 2015; Kadi et al., 2023).

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Social Research on behalf of the Upper Austrian Chamber of Labour in 2023-2024 (Kadi et al., 2024). The project analysed the situation of working carers in (Upper) Austria, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Methodologically, existing surveys were used on the one hand, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with employed informal carers (n = 19) from Upper Austria and with people who are in professional contact (e.g. home nurses) with informal carers (n = 6) on the other. The quote in the title comes from an interview with a study participant who draws attention to an important aspect of caring for family members—the creeping process of overburdening, which caregivers may find difficult to admit, especially when care has to be combined with gainful employment.

**What challenges  
informal carers face at  
work?**

The following sections provide information on how many people in (Upper) Austria currently (have to) combine informal care and gainful employment, what effects informal caregiving has on gainful employment, what challenges in gainful employment carers are confronted with and what role existing support measures play in this. The concluding recommendations for policymakers are intended to help improve the situation of informal carers in gainful employment or of working age.

## **Frequency of caring for family members and impact on employment**

### **Who cares and works?**

**In Austria, 472,000  
to 1 million people  
of working age are  
informal carers.**

In order to find out how many people in (Upper) Austria combine informal caregiving and gainful employment, data from the 2018 EU Labour Force Survey, the 2022 Austrian Microcensus and the 2022 Survey of Gender Gaps in Unpaid Care, Individual and Social Activities conducted by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) were used. As these data sets are based on different definitions of informal care and different survey methods, their analysis leads to different results. Depending on the definition and survey, around 7.5% to 21.3% of the (Upper) Austrian population aged between 20 and 64 can be described as informal carers. In absolute figures, this corresponds to a range of 472,000 to 1 million people of working age for Austria as a whole and approx. 78,000 to 167,000 people for Upper Austria.

According to the 2018 EU Labour Force Survey, which estimates that 7.5 % of the population aged between 20 and 64 are carers, 5.9 % of employees, 9.6 % of the self-employed and 8.8 % of people registered as unemployed are carers (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Prevalence of informal carers of working age (20-64 years)**

Features	in %	Upper Austria		Austria	
		absolute	adjusted	absolute	adjusted
<b>In total</b>	7,53	68.327	<b>78.166</b>	412.377	<b>471.759</b>
<b>Gender</b>					
Women	8,69	41.629	47.624	253.422	289.915
Men	5,54	26.698	30.542	158.955	181.844
<b>Employment status</b>					
Employed	5,92	39.862	45.602	228.930	261.896
Self-employed	9,61	8.525	9.753	50.555	57.835
Unemployed	8,76	19.940	22.811	132.892	152.028

Source: Statistics Austria; ad hoc module of the EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS); own calculations, whereby persons caring for children with disabilities under the age of 18 are not included in this survey. To ensure the inclusion of carers in this group, a weighting coefficient (1.144) was applied to obtain "adjusted" figures. The calculation of the weighting coefficient is based on data from the Survey of Gender Gaps in Unpaid Care, Individual and Social Activities of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) 2022, which includes informal carers of children with disabilities under the age of 18 and therefore provides information on how much the prevalence of informal carers is underestimated if only family members aged 18 and over are taken into account.

According to the EU Labour Force Survey, 61.2% of employed informal carers are women, and 38.7% are men. The majority (61.7%) have a secondary education. Most employed carers are in the highest income quartile (40.1%). This indicates that carers with lower incomes are more likely to give up their gainful employment instead of combining informal caregiving and gainful employment. In addition, 12.2% have migration experience and 41.4% live in regions with low population density. The latter indicates that family members in rural regions, which tend to have less professional care and support available, often have to fill this gap themselves.

### **What impact does informal caregiving have on working life?**

According to the 2018 EU Labour Force Survey, 36% of employed informal carers find it difficult to combine caring for family members and gainful employment. The main reasons for this are unpredictable or unfavourable working hours (26.4%) and demanding or strenuous work (22%). A slightly smaller number of informal carers cited long working hours as a reason for their difficulties in combining informal care and paid work (18.9%), followed by a long commute (17.8%). 9.4% cited a lack of support from their employer as a reason.

According to the same data, around 40% of working informal carers in (Upper) Austria believe that they do not have the necessary flexibility in terms of their working hours to fulfil their caring responsibilities. In addition, 5.7% of informal carers have already had to take at least one month off work due to their caring responsibilities. Moreover, 6.7% of informal carers have already had to reduce their working hours for more than one month. In both cases, around two-thirds of these are women.

**Some 9.4% of women in part-time employment cite caring for family members as reason for their part-time employment.**

Analyses of the Austrian Microcensus 2022 show that around 7.5% of part-time employees across Austria (9.4% of women and 1.7% of men) work part-time due to caring for family members. In addition, around 1.2% of the unemployed cited caring for family members as the reason for leaving their last job. Some 3.7% of the unemployed stated that they were unable to look for work due to caring for family members. The data on unemployed informal carers also shows that unemployment among women was more frequently related to caring for family members.

## Experiences of informal carers regarding work and support measures<sup>2</sup>

### Employment is adapted to fit the care situation

The interviews also show that family members are faced with major challenges when it comes to reconciling caring activities with gainful employment. Experience reports indicate that informal carers often adapt their employment situation to fit the caring situation, for example, by reducing their working hours or switching to jobs that allow them more flexibility in terms of time.

*"I have reduced my working hours [...]. I first worked full time, then 30 hours, and now I'm down to 24 hours [...] because I can't keep it together at home either." (Informal carer who looks after her father with Parkinson's)*

*"At the beginning, I actually thought I could do it while working my normal hours, on the side [...] But that's not possible." (Carer who has cared for her mother, her brother's partner and her brother)*

However, there are limits to these individual "solutions", which are often accompanied by considerable costs (such as reduced income and, in the long

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<sup>2</sup> The results presented below are based on the analysis of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with informal carers of working age (n = 19) and people who have professional contact with informal carers (e.g. home carers; n = 6) from Upper Austria.



**The combination of caregiving for a family member and employment can be extremely challenging despite reduced working hours.**

term, reduced pension entitlements). For example, even people who have already reduced their working hours face immense challenges in balancing care and work.

This is due, in particular, to gaps in professional care. In this regard, informal carers emphasise that there is a general lack of care and nursing services, that the existing services are not affordable for everyone and that professional services do not adequately meet the needs of those in need of care or the informal carers themselves.

Due to gaps in professional care, informal carers sometimes find themselves forced to take on more tasks than they would like to or are able to handle over long periods of time. If informal carers are required to take on more caregiving duties than they are willing or able to provide, the integration of informal caregiving and employment becomes more challenging. In addition to the high psychological and physical strain associated with this, this may also further aggravate the financial strain that many informal carers experience.

### **Support measures fall short**

Existing benefits and services such as leave options and financial compensation benefits (e.g. care leave allowance) are an important form of support for informal carers in general and working informal carers in particular. These benefits were further expanded as part of the 2022-2024 care reform. Austria stands out in an international comparison due to its wide range of support measures (Rocard & Llena-Nozal, 2022). However, the experiences of those affected show that there are various barriers to accessing these services and offers.

First, this applies to the benefits and services themselves if they are based on too narrowly defined eligibility criteria or are not sufficient in scope (e.g. length of leave periods and amount of income replacement) to make it easier to reconcile caring for family members and gainful employment to a relevant extent. Second, informal carers are sometimes unable to take advantage of existing benefits, such as respite care, for practical reasons.

Third, those affected report that information on existing benefits and services is difficult to access. Moreover, there are bureaucratic hurdles when applying and authorities act defensively—one often has to "fight" for access to benefits and services.

**Informal carers perceive information about existing services and offers as difficult to access.**

*"All the applications you have to make! I was just on the phone to all the authorities. And with the care allowance, you have to fill out 100,000 forms and send in all the bank statements. That's actually the most stressful thing, I have to be honest. Because [it's] just so much on top of everything else. Your mind is already in a state of emergency, and then you still have to organise everything else."  
(Informal carer who cared for her daughter with cancer)*

Due to these hurdles and the different requirements that informal carers have to meet to overcome them (such as prior knowledge), informal carers themselves have the impression that there is currently no equal access to benefits and services.

## Recommendations for policymakers

Based on the results and findings presented above, the following recommendations can be derived for political decision-makers and the social partners:

- *Expansion of affordable and high-quality professional care and support services:* Expanding professional care and support services is the most important form of support for informal carers, as such services offer relief and give informal carers more freedom to decide to what extent they want to take on care tasks.
- *Adapting workplaces to the needs of informal carers:* New models of work organisation and working hours to help reconcile (full-time) work and caregiving are a key starting point for enabling informal carers to participate fully in the labour market and counteracting the burdens that they are currently experiencing. This requires, among other things, changes to labour law and funding for companies that implement appropriate measures.
- *Improving the visibility and recognition of informal carers:* A first step would be to include informal carers more in the assessment of needs as part of the care allowance. This should not only involve categorising the need for care but also recording the needs of family members. It would also be worth considering voluntary registration as an informal carer. This would make the status of informal carers visible and could also simplify bureaucratic processes when applying for support services.
- *Legal recognition of caring for family members and expansion of services for informal carers:* The care and nursing of family members should be recognised as socially valuable work, and comprehensive assistance (e.g. financial, professional, psychological) should be provided for informal carers. In par-

ticular, there is a need for longer periods of leave and increased leave benefits with lower-threshold access. Measures for informal carers should also consider that there is not necessarily just one main caregiver; there are often several people involved in caring for family members, and informal carers do not always live in the same household as the person being cared for.

- *Easier access to existing support services:* Informal carers need improved, low-threshold information services that are close to home and provide them with comprehensive advice. There is also a need for easier access to services, such as simplifying bureaucratic processes and removing administrative hurdles.
- *Facilitating the return to work after a period of caring for family members:* There is a need for a range of measures to support people who wish to return to work after caring for family members, such as targeted help in finding a job, retraining programmes or placement in subsidised jobs if caring for family members has led to or contributed to physical or mental limitations.
- *Recognising caring for family members as a women's policy issue:* As care and support for family members is predominantly provided by women, caring for family members is also a women's policy issue. Measures to support informal carers are therefore also necessary to ensure women's participation in the labour market and their social security, both now and in the future. In addition, framework conditions must be created so that more men also take on care and support in the family and their environment, such as awareness-raising and educational measures as well as financial incentives.
- *Improving the database and research on the situation of informal carers:* The situation of informal carers in Austria has been researched to some extent, but not sufficiently. Although various data sets provide information on individual aspects of caring for family members, there is a lack of systematic, comprehensive and regular surveys. Therefore, investment in building better and more reliable data on informal carers and the funding of corresponding research is required.

Overall, the issue of reconciling employment and caregiving for family members needs to be broadly embedded in existing policies in the areas of labour, social affairs and care. This would be an important step towards ensuring the further development of social security and its sustainability in societies with the increasing longevity of the population. Specifically, social security systems must be designed in such a way that periods in the life course in which people (have to) care for other people are explicitly recognised, socially protected and supported by appropriate measures.



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