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Mothers in Distress. And what does that have to do with the economy?

Women who have children and earn their money through paid work have reached the limits of what they are able to bear. All the children, including teenagers, are now at home. The older ones aren't allowed to get together, the younger are left staring at barricaded playgrounds. According to recent news reports it will be the middle of May, before schools start to reopen – even at a limited capacity. That means for months mothers are the sole entertainers of small children and are also responsible for homeschooling the older children. There seems to be total chaos at the kindergartens. Are they open or not?

The offers of help are ambivalent. The government emphasizes that there is capacity. So why aren't women using them? You guessed right: out of fear of accusations of being bad mothers, who “give their children away.” That was always a cliché to end any discussion about preschool care and now it is being revived when women are accused of placing their children in danger of a deadly virus in order to egotistically relax at her home office and work.

In extreme cases single mothers are pent-up 24/7 with their children, usually in cramped quarters where they have to work from home for the office or as a one woman business (often a precariat). These tiny businesses were mostly founded because women have to plan their lives around their children. Such a situation is a recipe for disaster. Mothers were previously supported by their network of women, starting with their own mothers, who are no longer allowed to help, because a quasi-house arrest for senior citizens, even if a grandmother is young, she is supposed to keep her distance from her daughter and grandchildren. If the mother does not follow the rules she will be the one accused of any infection! When mothers so exasperated that they turn on the television or tablet, they are considered bad mothers; also if they don't want to cook. Remember: mothers are always to blame. She is either accused of doing “too much” or “too little” or not the right thing.

The policy of outsourcing care for the elderly by temporarily importing Romanian and Hungarian nurses has proven to be horrendous. Now when all the support of the healthcare workers is gone, guess who will take over this care? A hint: it will probably not be the son-in-law.

At times when it would be feasible for mothers and fathers to equally divide up work at their home offices and childcare – a new study shows that again, that is not happening. Even when the chairman of the board and the general director cannot claim to be indispensable and must run off to a business trip or a meeting. It also turns out that male scholars increase their publication load while female researchers do not.

It is also evident that two people are not enough to really care for children. Somehow everyone knew that the nuclear family would become a prison. Family Ideal, my a**. “So that there will not be more than merely screaming”, one minister called for reinforcing women’s shelters and rape crisis centers, which had already begun to starve under the conservative government. Women and children in nuclear families were already a high risk for physical and psychological violence. Now that all the support has vanished and financial worries take center stage, it is certain to be a disaster. Even separations and divorces cannot go into effect now due to lack of resources for a new apartment and courts have reduced their caseloads to emergencies only.

I am writing this essay because it became clear that there is much that needs to be said about the current health situation and its direct economic consequences. Supposedly people address issues that are the most important and most urgent. The so-called “women’s issues” are once again overlooked. and all the proposals made by politicians, economists and health experts sound like mansplaining. They say, “We must act in the interests of the state.” My point being that it is long overdue to finally recognize motherhood as an economic category.

All analyses show that it would change everything if people would finally understand that our current level of consumption is neither desirable nor necessary. And that relying on Amazon as the primary distribution channel for online commerce is fatal. In a similar vein, years of outsourcing all production to countries in the South and Asia has resulted in shortages of the most necessary commodities. People are talking about the value of domestic agriculture for putting food on our tables and how we are not actually dependent on flying in exotic fruits and vegetables.

All of that is true, but there is still no mention of motherhood. When women are referred to as “system maintenance” that is a travesty, because of their scandalously low income. Now the corona virus stimulus is on its way and the unions want to advocate for women. Now what is referred to as economy is based on the foundation of unpaid or poorly paid care or work within the family as well as typical “women’s work”, assistance positions, which I call “housewified” low-paid work. This was discovered at the beginning of the second wave of feminism, yet there has been very little substantial change since then. Why? Because this is the only way the economy can function!

The discussion about who should pay for all of this in the future is already in progress. Everyone can see that the welfare state is keeping the economy afloat. People are calling again and again for those to pay, who are not taking much of a hit right now; people are suggesting once again that the wealthy should be taxed, although it is more likely that – just as the financial crisis of 2008 – there will be no change in the inequality. Although the corporations bear the smallest tax burden, the small and mid-sized businesses along with the employees are the ones keeping the state running. Right now digital companies and online commerce are reaping maximum profits. Mostly it is big business and corporations with enormous resources who are looking for government subsidies (even for obligatory face masks). We are told that all the subsidies are going to the domestic economy, but is that true?

It is obscene when the responsible minister in France is forced to personally request corporations not to take advantage of the unemployment benefits offered by the government. And only with great difficulty could CEOs be prevented from paying themselves millions in bonuses.

At the same time everyone is talking about the same scenario lurking over the horizon, that the crisis will result in an even larger gap in income and wealth distribution, as if we are being prepared for a great redistribution of capital. It is haunting the way this is presented as a natural phenomenon. We are told that small businesses are to blame if they failed to accumulate reserve funds and are openly called “contenders for takeover”. Where are all the politicians who could do something to prevent that? What are they doing to battle the threatening poverty, for which the USA is a gruesome example? Why do taxes on wealth and capital gains, etc. fail again and again, whether the government is conservative or social-democrat?

And who is thinking about remunerations for the huge increase in the work performed by mothers during these months? The 24-hour a day work to raise the next generation of citizens and taxpayers. What is the value, expressed monetarily, when a woman could have used the time to advance her career (or maybe simply work in peace) instead of staying at home homeschooling, minding children and cooking? An unbelievable sum, which no one dares to calculate. No, the most she may receive is praise – and four years added to her pension. If things go bad she could face penalties.

All the demands of the Austrian “Frauenring” which were recently presented to the government as a petition came from the welfare state idea and were tied to the advancement of the social state. How is that possible with a (Christian-conservative-neoliberal) governing party which is working for the opposite and continues to drain state capital to benefit the finance markets? The fact that the Green Party is the junior partner in the government will do little to change that. Therefore I have little hope that anything will be done to counter the dramatic increase in unequal distribution with which we are currently threatened.

I am counting on everyone to raise their voices against a future of a corporate economy supported by (quasi) unpaid work performed by women.