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Wages for Care Work: COVID-19 and the Public Struggle for Nurses' Wage Equality

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the news media debate on nurses' wages in Finland during the COVID-19 crisis. By looking at the COVID-19 pandemic in the Nordic context, the study presents the pandemic as a societal context in which the care work burden has increased and the value of care is highlighted. The analysis of the COVID-19 public media debate sheds light on how the struggle over nurses' wages features in this societal context. The study contributes to the research on the gender wage gap related to the economic misrecognition of care work, and the analysis draws from the feminist democratic theoretical concept of the public sphere perceiving the COVID-19 public media as a site for political change-making. My analysis of Finnish news media articles identified three important discourses on the objective of pay rises in the care sector: conveying frontline care professionals' experiences during the pandemic and framing them as an economic-political issue; relying on the ideal of common good in the corporatist debate on care professionals' collective economic interests; and presenting expert analyses of the structural causes behind the gendered segregation of the labour market and the economic undervaluation of care work.

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Introduction

This article analyses the discursive-political struggle over nurses' wages in the Finnish news media during the COVID-19 pandemic. The care sector's low wages and gendered pay gap have long been recognized, but the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the issue. The article addresses the persisting problem of wage inequality in Finland but also the broader question of the economic misrecognition of care work. In varying ways across the globe, care work—mostly performed by women—has been described as being outside of “real economic activities”, and care workers' contributions to society have not really been economically acknowledged. (Dowling, 2021; Federici, 2021; Folbre, 2021) The increased public attention that care has received during the pandemic might lead to the economic value of care work being recognized.

In my analysis, I ask: What kinds of discourses have emerged in the public media on nurses' wage equality and their claims for pay rises and economic compensation during the COVID-19 pandemic? Can the public debate help close the gendered wage gap and lead to economic recognition of care work?

My article contributes to the discussion on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality and to the previous research on public sector care professionals' wage struggles related to

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the question of the economic recognition of care work. Focusing on media discourses helps in the identification of concrete ways in which professional care work and the issue of nurses' wages have gained visibility and provoked discussion during the COVID-19 pandemic. I apply the concept of the public sphere (Benhabib, 1992; Fraser, 1990; Young, 2000) as a critical democratic theoretical idea that helps extract the transformative potential and critical challenges inherent in the mediated public debate.

The results of my analysis show that the highlighted societal status of nurses in the media during the pandemic has created opportunities to discursively legitimize their wage claims and thereby also challenge the economic undervaluation of care work:

First, media articles have highlighted the experiences of nurses and their everyday struggles during the pandemic and connected these experiences to economic-political claims. Second, the ideal of "the common good" that features in the public debate between the care workers unions and employers, has helped frame nurses' economic interests as common issues. Third, the expert-driven structural-level analyses in the media has helped shed light on the underlying gender norms that condition care professionals' wages and on the crucial role of care work in the economy.

My article is structured as follows: After the introduction, I present an overview of previous research on the global societal effects of the COVID-19 crisis and of the Finnish nurses' wage struggles. Moving on to a theoretical overview, I discuss the concept of the public sphere as a sphere of politicization, opinion-formation, and political change-making. The next section presents the data and the method of the study. After this I present my empirical analysis in three sections. In the analysis, I carefully examine the transformative potential of the public debate but also its critical challenges. In the discussion section I reflect on the results of my analysis in the light of the noticeable yet delicate momentum created by the COVID-19 crisis for advancing wage equality and the economic recognition of care.

COVID-19 and the Nurses' Wages Issue

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on women has been noticeable in terms of higher unemployment, more responsibilities at home, an increased workload, and greater health risks at work (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; Albanesi & Kim, 2021; Alon et al., 2021; Clark et al., 2021; Lewandowski et al., 2021; Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2021; Ruohomäki, 2020). Researchers have reported on the deepening of inequality during the COVID-19 crisis. But they have also noticed how the pandemic has highlighted the indispensable value of care work in our societies, which has long been neglected (e.g. Bahn et al., 2020; Ozkazanc-Pan & Pullen, 2020).

The effects of the COVID-19 crisis on care work—paid or unpaid—highlight the long-standing problems related to the lack of sustainability of our care systems, stemming from economic undervaluing of care work. Feminist political economists have pointed out how treating care work as a free or cheap subsidy for the so-called productive economy, eventually exhausts the conditions for providing care. This has grave consequences for the whole economy that depends on both human and environmental sustainability (Dowling, 2021; Folbre, 2021). One of the concrete manifestations of neglecting the societal and economic role of care work is the low salaries in the social and health care sector, which in turn are related to gender norms that deem women's work less valuable than men's (e.g. Folbre, 2021; Thomason & Macias-Alonso, 2020)

In Finland, as globally, professional care work is mostly performed by women, and the female-dominated care sector's wages drag behind those of male-dominated occupations (OECD, 2019; Statistics Finland, 2020, 2021). As many researchers have pointed out, only modest progress towards wage equality has been made (Saari et al., 2021; Saari, 2013). The Nordic welfare state, by establishing a vast public health and social services sector, has created work opportunities, but amplified the feminization of care work (Koskinen Sandberg, 2018; Saari et al., 2021). According to research, the state has failed to implement its legally binding equality goals in terms of the pay gap between men and women (Saari, 2013). At the same time, the corporatist system has endorsed

rather than challenged the silent acceptance of lower wages in female-dominated sectors (Kylä-Laaso et al., 2021)

In recent decades, the role of the public media in politics has grown, offering political and corporatist actors an important channel to communicate and gain public support for their actions and objectives (Hjarvard, 2013; Reunanen & Väliverronen, 2020). However, this has not led to straightforward results. For example, in 2007, nurses and their unions managed to put the issue of pay rises on the public agenda, holding political decision-makers accountable for their pre-election promises to raise wages. Then, the financial crisis shook society, nurses' wage claims were reframed as self-interested and irresponsible, and the saving money discourse was widely supported by the media (Kylä-Laaso & Koskinen Sandberg, 2020; Saari et al., 2021).

Wage inequality and the undervaluing of care work have proven persistent, despite efforts by wage and gender equality claimants to modify the situation. The COVID-19 crisis further deepened gender inequality and gendered care burdens. However, as my analysis of the Finnish COVID-19 news media shows, the struggle over care workers' wages gained visibility during the crisis, and the public debate offered some important discursive-political tools to promote nurses' wage claims.

Public Sphere as a Site for Political Change-Making

In the democratic theoretical account, the public sphere refers to a broad range of informal discursive practices and venues through which polity members form and press political opinions (Habermas, 1989). The concept of the public sphere has been applied to feminist theorizing, as it provides means to critically examine the opportunities for various subordinated groups to participate in “informal” politics in civil society, and to evaluate the potential of public discourse in pursuing social justice. (e.g. Benhabib, 1992; Fraser, 1990; Young, 2000) The concept of the public sphere is useful for analysing the public debate on health care professionals' wages, as it helps us critically examine the media debate from the perspective of who gets to participate and on what conditions. Also, through its specific emancipatory character, the concept helps highlight the potential of promoting wage equality and the economic recognition of care work through public discourse.

One should be wary of having an idealistic view of the formation and mobilization of public opinion through public deliberation (e.g. Ackerly, 2000; Fraser, 1992; Young, 2001). Many informal exclusionary practices and norms affect the public debate, and even when politicizing issues that have previously been excluded from public debate, the outcomes of such debates are uncertain (*ibid.*). Journalistic choices and media logic, as well as societal power relations in general, affect the ways in which issues and arguments are framed, different kinds of expertise are interpreted and acknowledged, and discussion participants are selected (e.g. Bleich et al., 2015; Dahlberg, 2018). Gatekeeping restricts access to economic-political public discussion when a certain expertise (such as education and economics qualifications) is required of the speaker in order for them to be recognized as a legitimate participant in the public dialogue.

Despite these limitations, when it comes to fulfilling its democratic ideal, the public sphere also offers emancipatory possibilities. The feminist slogan “the personal is political” (see Hanisch, 1969/2006), for example, emphasizes the importance of seeing and framing private (or privatized) experiences as political, and economic-political questions—and sharing them in public. Furthermore, making claims in the public sphere helps legitimize group-specific interests as issues that concern everyone: issues of justice. “Public spiritedness”, for example, requires that nurses' claims for higher wages cannot be pursued in the public sphere in the same way as sitting at a corporatist negotiating table, but have to be argued as legitimate in front of the whole polity (see Young, 1990).

The public sphere also provides possibilities to make claims on several discursive fronts at the same time. When the structural analyses of the persisting wage differences are presented alongside personal experiences, for example, it is easier to see their connection to the larger issue of the

gendered undervaluation of care work. At the same time, to many, the economic discussion itself tends to be abstract and unrelatable. As Haugg (1997, p. 131) notes, there is a “failure to take the trouble to study the ways in which people experience the structures described in the critique of political economy in their daily lives.” Further, the public sphere brings together different kinds of knowledge, which put pressure on the politicians to reconsider, for instance, COVID-19 recovery measures that have not properly considered the effects of the pandemic on women, or pink-collar sectors in particular (e.g. Folbre, 2021; Walby, 2021).

The concept of the public sphere helps us reflect on the possibilities of political change-making through the media. The potential of publicity lies in not only giving a certain issue visibility but also in offering a site for politicizing and legitimizing interests and objectives. Ideally, the public sphere endorses the plurality of actors whose perspectives are channelled in public opinion and incorporated in political decision-making, but it also has a “messy” character. The COVID-19 crisis, for instance, has provoked public discussion that can be seen as an opportunity for gaining public support for nurses’ wage claims and economic recognition of care work. But the created discursive space is temporal and its results are unpredictable and complicated.

Data and Method

The research data for this study consisted of 98 written news media articles collected from widely read Finnish news sites, tabloids, and newspapers. The articles on the topic of the economic conditions and role of gendered care work were published between 1 January 2020 and 22 June 2021. The data collection timeframe reaches from the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis to the period in the summer of 2021 when the crisis seemed to temporarily loosen its grip in Finland.

The media sources examined in the study represented the most widely distributed media rather than more marginal publications, and also considered regional as well as linguistic representation. Both Yle Uutiset, produced by Finland’s national public service media company, and the commercial MTV Uutiset provide free access to their content. *Iltalehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat* are the two biggest tabloids in Finland, and *Helsingin Sanomat* is the biggest newspaper, followed by local newspapers *Aamulehti* and *Turun Sanomat*. *Hufvudstadsbladet* represents the biggest Swedish-language newspaper in the country. All these newspapers are privately owned and chargeable, but can also be accessed through public libraries.

Data collection used the key words “care”, “care work”, “health care”, “nurses”, “corona”, “COVID-19”, “economic”, “money”, “gender”, “gender equality”, “wages”, “wage equality”, and “wage differences”. The collected data formed a relatively small part of the total COVID-19 coverage, but were nevertheless notable in the context of infrequent media discussions on care work and gender equality-related topics in the Finnish media in general. Analysis of the data revealed the following three main discourses as central in the public media discussion on nurses’ wages during the COVID-19 pandemic: 1) Highlighting the experiences of nurses and translating these experiences into economic-political claims, 2) The debate on group interests versus the “common good” between nurses’ unions and the employers’ organizations, and 3) the expert discourse that focuses on analysing the structural causes of the gendered wage differences related to care work.

All of the analysed media proclaimed to be politically neutral, but no actual party-political differences existed between the media either (Nyroos & Sharma, 2021). However, they did have some differences in their content and style (ibid.). The tabloids *Iltalehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat* are more polemic, whereas Yle Uutiset and *Helsingin Sanomat* are more analytic. This difference also shows in my analysis. All the three main discourses were present across the selected media, but the deeper-level structural analyses were more common in Yle Uutiset, and the antagonistically framed corporatist battle was more visible in the tabloids.

I employed critical discourse analysis, which pays attention to how societal power relations are reproduced and legitimized through language. (e.g. Mullet, 2018). As I demonstrate here,

arguments and rhetoric related to common good, for instance, are easily anchored to a hegemonic interpretation of what is good for the economy. However, discourses not only reproduce inequalities but also have the potential to transform them (Allen & Faigley, 1995; Bartlett, 2018; Hughes, 2018, p. 193; Lazar, 2018, p. 374). In my analysis, I looked for these positive aspects of discourses in order to highlight their transformative potential.

I paid attention to how the nurses' own voices (of course journalistically filtered) came across in the media; how the available discourses and vocabularies were applied in a manner that advanced rather than opposed nurses' wage claims; and what kind of agents, other than nurses and their unions, provided background support for their wage claims. Highlighting these "positive" aspects of public discourse from the perspective of their change-making potential does not, however, exclude careful consideration of the limitations and counter-arguments that stem from the same discursive framework.

Discourse on Nurses' Experiences of the Crisis

According to my analysis, during the COVID-19 crisis, the Finnish news media provided the care professionals with a platform for sharing personal experiences and translating them into opinions and economic-political claims. The nurses' experiences gave the general public access to situated knowledge that often remains hidden in politics. The presenting of experiences was filled with affective rhetoric that appealed to the public audience during the pandemic. These acute experiences were also connected to the longstanding workload problems and poor economic conditions in the care sector. Still, the temporality of affective reactions and changes in the political climate might be an obstacle to mobilizing experience-based knowledge into policy.

From Private Experiences to Economic-Political Claims

Several of the analysed media articles were based on interviews with health care professionals, mostly registered nurses, working at the "frontline" of the COVID-19 crisis. These nurses and other essential workers were asked about their experiences of living and working during the pandemic. The media articles highlighted that the extraordinary situation affected the nurses' work, sense of personal security, and mechanisms for coping with their workload. They emphasized the nurses' disappointment with the inadequate compensation they received for their hard work:

An ER nurse exhausted by Corona became frustrated by the unwillingness of the politicians to support health care workers economically: "This is an extraordinary situation that cannot be compared to normal working conditions." (Hanhivaara, 2020)

My work feels even more important than before. My experience is that we are valued, but it does not show in the wage. (Pölkki & Valtavaara, 2021)

The nurses interviewed commented on their feelings about working under pandemic conditions and brought the concrete effects of the COVID-19 crisis on health care into the public light. However, the discourse was not only about experiences of tiredness and exhaustion, and the sense of being valued, it was also about the economic and material conditions of the work.

According to my analysis, the media did not merely look for stories of real-life battles on the frontline of the pandemic—it also used nurses' experiences to address and justify calls for better economic compensation for their work. The media discourse on the nurses' experiences during the COVID-19 crisis had a change-making character; it brought out the voice of people whose opinions and insights do not usually show in the mainstream public media. The nurses' publicly shared experiences gave readers access to situated knowledge (Hartsock, 2002; Young, 2000), and this knowledge offered a basis for legitimizing their economic-political claims.

Temporary Emotions for Long-lasting Results?

The articles that I analysed did not view the experience-based expertise of the nurses as abstract or general but as concrete and filled with emotion. As media scholars have pointed out (Döveling et al., 2011; Koivunen et al., 2021; Nikunen, 2018; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), the media do not seem to lack emotion in general, and this also showed in the news coverage on the pandemic. Indeed, headlines such as “The Frontline has to Both Clean Toilets and Wipe the Tears” (Pölkki & Valtavaara, 2021), “ER Nurses at their Breaking Point” (Taleva, 2020a) are emotionally charged, and the articles (accompanied by pictures of nurses in full protective gear) give readers a window to look into the everyday realities of fighting the pandemic.

However, as Dean (1999, pp. 160–161) points out, the public audience (such as the readers of the news media) tends to interpret these feelings as political action, which can be a serious obstacle to making concrete changes by highlighting experiences and emotions. Furthermore, there is the issue of duration: Will the emotions and feelings of sympathy around the media coverage of the crisis last beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, or will its effects disappear after the crisis? A few media discussions that I analysed linked the pandemic-related experiences to the persistent problem of the undervaluation of care work:

According to Westerlund, nurses and care workers have been under pressure for a long time due to low wages. She wonders whether the efforts of care workers required in the current situation will be rewarded. “We give our best now. But if we get burned out afterwards, will we get the support we need?” (Snårbacka, 2020)

Salminen, who is tired of empty promises, is not very hopeful when it comes to the pay rise. “It seems that there is never a right time for the pay rise. Even now, you can hear people talk that it is the wrong time, again.” (Kuparinen, 2020)

These excerpts highlight nurses’ experiences during the pandemic in the context of persistent conditions in the nursing sector. The articles reported that the work was already hard before the COVID-19 pandemic, and there were calls for wage rises even before the crisis. In their research, in which they interviewed public sector nurses in Sweden (Selberg & Mulinari, 2022), Rebecca Selberg, Magnus Sandberg, and Paula Mulinari reported similar experiences of longstanding undervaluation and unbearable workload. My analysis revealed attempts in the public discourse to exceed the rhetoric of temporal emotions awakened by the crisis and to anchor the experiences of the nurses to the persisting problems of wage inequality and economic undervaluation of care work.

At the same time, the interviews with the nurses presented in the media revealed skepticism—strengthened by their experiences during the pandemic—as to whether wages and working conditions were ever going to improve. The pessimism seems justified in light of the minor results in the long-standing struggle for pay rises (Saari et al., 2021; Saari, 2013). As the analyses of the previous public struggles have also shown, the attitude towards the nurses’ pay rises is prone to changes in the political climate, and public sector care work is easily framed as an economic burden by the media (Saari et al., 2021). Thus, the compassionate public reception of the nurses’ cause during the crisis is likely to change.

Discourse on the Common Good in the Corporatist Debate on Nurses’ Wages

During the COVID-19 crisis, the trade unions representing care workers (Tehy and SuPer) continued their long-running demands for wage rises but also demanded short-term economic compensation for all care professionals working on the frontline. A striking feature of the public corporatist debate during the pandemic was its agonistic character and the way in which the rhetoric of the common good was applied in the debate. The employers, as well as some of the journalists and other union representatives, claimed that the care workers’ unions did not consider other workers, nor the best of the economy. The nurses’ collectives also public-spiritedly framed

their demands as claims for the common good, but mobilizing one's definition of common good remains difficult when in an underdog position.

Economically Unrealistic and Selfish Wage Claims

Although the negotiations between the care workers' unions and the employers officially took place behind closed doors, the public media can be seen as a stage for these corporatist politics (see Reunanen & Väliverronen, 2020). From the very beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the media addressed the question of whether the "time is right" for accepting nurses' and other care workers' economic claims. The COVID-19 crisis halted ongoing corporatist negotiations in 2020, and some of the media articles that I analysed discussed this interruption in terms of economic realism. This is how one political journalist for MTV Uutiset, a national news channel, described the situation:

The care workers' unions had been preparing for the negotiations for a long time and agitated their members almost up to the point of anger. This is probably also the reason why it was so hard for the unions to accept that the corona virus, and the sacking of personnel and the termination of jobs, as well as the strain on hospital districts caused by the crisis—the tailspin of the whole economy—does not allow for major wage increases. (Kallionpää, 2020)

The nurses were told that the time was not right for wage rises due to the economic situation and the unavoidable cuts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The same argument was repeated by the academics' trade union (Akava) leader Sture Fjäder, who claimed, under the headline "Akava's Fjäder Warns Nurses about the Dangers of Hemming and Hawing", that the economic situation was not right for care workers' unions to keep pushing their claims (Turun Sanomat, 2020).

The economy was presented as the common good that the unions had to consider and to which they had to adjust their demands. This observation stems well with that made by Reunanen and Väliverronen (2020) who, in their analysis of public corporatist political discourses observed how supposedly selfish interest-political claims were counterposed by economic realism. Besides invoking the concept of "economic realism" during the extraordinary situation, the news articles that I analysed also revealed another way of appealing to the common good. The employers (as well as some of the unions) claimed that nurses could not receive extra money because this would not have been fair to all other workers:

According to Jalonen, the employer took it as a question of justice that the wages of just one sector should not be raised at the expense of other workers in the public sector. (Nurmi, 2020)

Many of the articles highlighted the argument that nurses' pay rises and other economic compensations fail to consider the question of justice for all (e.g. Salomaa, 2020; Valtanen, 2020). In this context, justice refers to allocating scarce resources evenly. According to this conception of justice, the group interests pursued by the unions were selfish and self-interested and thus unjustified.

Nurses' Wages as a Common Concern

The unions had to defend themselves against these arguments. When it came to negotiating the so-called COVID-19 compensations, the unions appealed to the fact that such compensations had also been paid in other Nordic countries (Taleva, 2020b; Valtanen, 2020). The unions also argued that their interest-based political claims were not restricted to one professional group. Already before the pandemic, Tehy's chair Millariikka Rytönen had pointed out (2020) that the union represented a wide range of professionals working in the care sector: children's nurses, midwives, social service workers, and so on. Furthermore, gender equality and public institutions' responsibility to close the pay gap between genders were also referred to as legitimate grounds for the calls for pay rises (Pikkarainen & Tanner, 2020; Väisänen, 2020). These arguments underline how wage claims were articulated in terms of justice and the common good rather than as selfish private interests.

In addition to the unions and their chairs, other care worker collectives, supported by their unions, pressed the issue via citizen initiatives, which were also noticed by the media. The quotation below shows how a nurse turned the question of suitable wages for individual nurses into a common concern about the whole economy:

We also want to emphasize that healthcare workers are not just a harmful cost to society: nurses pay taxes just like everyone else. When healthcare workers' solvency improves, their capacity to consume also gets better. This will benefit companies. (Pikkarainen & Tanner, 2020)

As the above excerpt suggests, defenders of the wage rise also depicted collective, interest-based political claims as issues of justice and the common good and that the wage rises would benefit the whole economy. The public-spirited rhetoric of the common good was adopted by the media to legitimize nurses' wage claims in the eyes of the general public, and the nurses were able to question the framing of their claims as selfish interest-politics.

From the perspective of the change-making potential of appealing to the common good, the problem was that the interests of the powerful are often afforded the greatest importance when deciding on the meaning of "the common good" (Fraser, 1990; Young, 2000). A further problem was that the state remained silent in the public wage negotiations, despite the fact that through its legislative and financing role the state is a major actor in implementing the common good (Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019; Saari, 2013). Indeed, my analysis revealed no significant contribution of politicians or other state-level representatives in the wage debate during the COVID-19 crisis.

Discourse on Structural Causes of Wage Inequality

The media discussions also entailed expert-driven structural analyses of the gender norms that condition nurses' wages. Although the researchers and experts were not presented as wage claimants, their viewpoints of the structural causes for wage inequality also came across in some of the nurses' comments and were used to legitimize the wage claims. My study found that the media presented critical analyses of treating care work as "a feminine calling" which plays down claims for higher wages. Also, the gender experts and pay rise claimants argued that the economy depended on care—an argument that seems serious given the central position of macroeconomic argumentation in public discourse and politics.

Feminine Wages?

I found that the focus on care work during the COVID-19 crisis directed the public discussion on the wage gap between genders towards the issue of gender segregation in the labour market. It is common to explain wage differences between men and women by referring to voluntary segregation, in which "women choose to be nurses instead of engineers", and to leave undiscussed the gender structures that underlie the segregation and the wage differences between sectors. Meanwhile, only direct wage discrimination is recognized as an equality problem (Saari, 2013). However, the media articles also interviewed gender experts and discussed the gendered structures behind the wage differences between female- and male-dominated work sectors:

Emotional work is thought of as natural and effortless for women. It is, perhaps, thought that while empathy comes naturally, it does not cost anything, says Hirvonen, a scholar who has researched gender equality in the work life. Being a woman is thus considered a taken-for-granted resource, which can be used in work life for free. The same kind of thinking is also evident during the corona crisis: "professionals have been praised and thanked but left without economic compensation." (Niemonen, 2020b)

The researchers interviewed by the news media referred to the persistent conceptions of women as possessing "motherly" traits, such as willingness to sacrifice their own interests for the sake of others, natural empathy, and other emotional skills. As researchers and feminist thinkers have also

pointed out elsewhere, these cultural ideas about women have been used to legitimize the lower wages in the care sector: private mothering has been extended to the public—that is, to caring for others in paid working life without proper economic compensation (e.g. Fraser, 2013; Pateman, 1988).

Using the idea of one's work being “a calling” as a means of justifying low wages was also highlighted in the media:

Referring to the nursing profession as “a calling” should, according to Anne Pauna, be left in the past: Work is a calling for doctors, too, as it is for CEOs—perhaps they wanted to work in a leading position. We all have a calling for our work. But for some reason, we believe that some deserve to be paid more than others.

(Mäntymaa, 2020)

Instead of saying that care work is not a calling and therefore deserves the same wages as any other profession, the interviewee in the excerpt above claimed that everyone, regardless of their gender, can feel a calling to their work; therefore, the calling to care work cannot be used to justify low wages.

The way the underlying normative and gendered conceptions of care work are brought into the public light helped politicize care professionals' wage levels and contest them being something given and natural. This discourse adopted in parts of the media debate also provided a means to argue against the gender segregation of the labour market as a matter of personal choice. It called for recognizing how gendered cultural structures condition peoples' life choices and the segregation of the labour market.

Connecting Care with Economy

The media discussion about the connection between cultural gender norms and wage levels was accompanied by insights into the value of care work for the economy and society at large. As many feminist researchers have pointed out since the 1960s, neglecting the societal role of social reproduction, such as care work, has consequences for gender equality and for the economy (Dowling, 2021; Federici, 1975; Folbre, 2021; Gardiner, 1997). The media articles I studied mentioned the interdependence between social reproduction and the economy:

Kotakorpi worries about long-term inequality effects of the COVID-19 restrictions, which are connected to the economy. The professor has paid particular attention to children studying outside the school. (...) The corona crisis makes the economic role of the state and the public sector visible. (Hara, 2020)

We, poorly paid women, have gone to work every single morning. Who would have taken care of the nurses' and doctors' children if the nursery schools had been closed? How would Finland's wheels have turned without us? (Pölkki & Valtavaara, 2021)

The first excerpt emphasizes that the COVID-19 crisis has made the economic role of the public sector visible. In Finland, the public sector is the biggest provider of health care but also of many other social reproduction services such as education, daycare, and social work. It is not only the economic value of public social reproduction services that becomes visible, but also as the second excerpt suggests, the interdependency between different care sectors. As the interviewee states, the wheels of society would not turn without functional care chains.

The experts and researchers interviewed in the news articles hypothesized that the pandemic would be followed by economic distress, austerity measures, and cuts (Hara, 2020; Niemonen, 2020a; Sundman and Hara, 2020). The politicians participated in the debate on the economic conditions of the public service sector after the COVID-19 crisis (e.g. Fresnes et al., 2020; MTV Uutiset, 2020), but did not explicate their stance towards the issue of the nurses' wage rises. The studied media articles linked care work to the economy, but there were also signs that the economic policy would not consider these linkages after the crisis.

Discussion: Window of Opportunity

The COVID-19 crisis has been one of the biggest unexpected challenges that the privileged world has had to face in its recent history. The crisis has threatened the lives and livelihoods of millions of people and has deepened inequalities on several levels. Care workers have carried a major burden, and yet the economic undervaluation of their work continues. The gendered wage gap between the female-dominated care sector and other male-dominated work sectors is one manifestation of this undervaluation. The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened inequalities; nevertheless, I sought to analyse some of the emancipatory public discourses related to nurses' wages that were prompted by the crisis.

The COVID-19 crisis has led to calls for a reconsideration of the value of care in societies all over the world (e.g. Bahn et al., 2020; Ozkazanc-Pan & Pullen, 2020; Thomason & Macias-Alonso, 2020). Based on my analysis of the Finnish news media, I conclude that the COVID-19 crisis has indeed put the economic-political claims and conditions of care work on the public agenda. The concept of the public sphere has helped evaluate the media discourses not only in terms of gaining visibility but also from the perspective of the democratic accessibility and change-making potential of discursive-political interaction. Simultaneously, the empirical features of the public debate remind about the limits of an idealized conception of the public sphere.

The public debate has taken place on several fronts and succeeded in deepening and pluralizing the discussion on care professionals' wages and the gendered pay gap. It has engaged various actors with different kinds of knowledge and perspectives in the debate. The public debate on nurses' wages thus at least partly fulfils the ideals of openness and plurality of the political public sphere envisioned in the writings of feminist democratic theorists (e.g. Fraser, 1990; Young, 1990). Furthermore, the way in which the nurses' experiences are connected to political demands has to be acknowledged. Despite its semi-public character and the fact that it affects society at large, working life and its problems are often privatized and depoliticized.

Of course, obstacles remain. Although, for example, the wage claimants' public-spirited framing of economic interests as common issues seems helpful in gaining legitimacy for wage claims, it remains difficult for nurses' collectives to claim authorship of the definition of the common good, which is often interpreted in terms of economic realism. It is also worth noting that the economic revaluing of care work depends on politicians and political decisions. Yet, the public voices of politicians have remained relatively silent during the COVID-19 crisis in terms of any concrete measures to tackle the issue.

As I write these concluding remarks, a new crisis has occupied the discursive spaces of Finland and other countries: the war in Ukraine has superseded the gradually unfolding COVID-19 crisis in news coverage. During the recent collective bargaining round, care workers' unions once again heard that the "time is not right" for making demands (Liiten, 2022). As previous research has shown, promoting gender equality through closing the gendered pay gap is repeatedly disregarded in favour of supposedly more important issues, often related to the economy. (Wagner & Teigen, 2021). Thus, the objective of wage equality remains difficult to achieve. However, some steps towards closing the wage gap have been adopted in Finland: an agreement on a 17% salary increase for nurses in the coming five years has just been reached (Tehy, 2022).

According to Sylvia Walby, "The temporality of [COVID-19] crisis needs to be taken into account before judgements are made as to whether it is a critical turning point" (2021, p. 37) I argue that the temporality of the public sphere must also be carefully considered, as the media debate appears in a specific societal context, and discourses that are available for public legitimization processes are changing. Further, uncertainty regarding the effects of public engagement remains a problem. That said, the ideal of a straightforward relationship between public opinion-formation and political change should also be challenged, as results of public debate may appear later, or in unexpected ways. Nevertheless, the politics of momentum, which involve seizing political opportunities in specific societal situations, such as the COVID-19 crisis, remain a fragile endeavour.

Author Contribution

The author has her PhD in gender studies from the University of Helsinki and has written her doctoral thesis on the concept of the public sphere in feminist democratic theory. Currently she works as a post-doctoral researcher in Dr. Hanna Ylöstalo's research project *Equality to economics, feminism to fiscal policy: Tensions of feminist knowledge and politics in the strategic state* (FEMTIE) at the University of Turku.

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