

## (E)quality Workplaces for Women? Gender Dynamics in Collaborative Workspaces in Rural and Peripheral Areas in Austria

Alexandra Wrbka \*

*Abstract:* Collaborative workspaces (CWS) are gaining popularity as alternatives to traditional offices, yet their gender dynamics remain underexplored. While CWS claim to offer a more egalitarian, open work atmosphere, prior research suggests workplaces are rarely gender-neutral. Drawing from ethnographic research of CWS in rural Austria, including one women-focused, this contribution provides insights about existing gender dynamics and reveals how organizational structure and workspace design may influence gender inequalities, emphasizing the importance of inclusive CWS in non-urban areas.

*Keywords:* Gender inequality, women, collaborative workspaces, non-urban areas, Austria

### Des lieux de travail égalitaire pour les femmes? Dynamiques de genre dans les espaces de travail collaboratifs dans les zones rurales et périphériques d'Autriche

*Résumé:* Les espaces de travail collaboratifs (ETC) sont devenus une alternative populaire aux bureaux traditionnels, mais leurs dynamiques de genre restent peu explorées. Alors qu'ils prétendent offrir une atmosphère égalitaire et ouverte, des recherches précédentes montrent que les espaces de travail ne sont pas neutres en matière de genre. Cette contribution, basée sur une ethnographie des ETC ruraux en Autriche dont un centré sur les femmes, explore les dynamiques de genre et révèle comment leur conception et organisation peuvent influencer l'(in)égalité de genre, en soulignant la nécessité d'espaces de travail inclusifs en milieu rural.

*Mots-clés:* Inégalités de genre, femmes, espaces de travail collaboratifs, zones non urbaines, Autriche

### Egalitäre Arbeitsplätze für Frauen? Geschlechterdynamik in kollaborativen Arbeitsräumen in ländlichen und peripheren Gebieten Österreichs

*Zusammenfassung:* Kollaborative Arbeitsräume (CWS) werden als Alternative zu herkömmlichen Büros populärer, doch deren Geschlechterdynamik ist wenig erforscht. CWS geben vor, eine egalitäre, offene Arbeitsatmosphäre zu bieten, existierende Studien hingegen beschreiben Arbeitsplätze als nicht geschlechtsneutral. Basierend auf ethnografischer Forschung in CWS in ländlichen Gebieten Österreichs, darunter ein frauenorientierter, gibt dieser Beitrag Einblicke in deren Geschlechterdynamik, zeigt, wie Organisationsstruktur und Gestaltung der Arbeitsräume Geschlechter(un)gleichheiten beeinflussen kann, und unterstreicht die Notwendigkeit inklusiver Arbeitsräume in ländlichen Gebieten.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Geschlechterungleichheiten, Frauen, kollaborative Arbeitsräume, nicht-städtische Gebiete, Österreich

\* Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Department of Communication, Media and Culture, GR-17671 Kallithea, alexandra.wrbka@panteion.gr.

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Rapid transformations in our globalized world and the recent Covid-19 pandemic have prompted a re-evaluation of societal preferences in work and living arrangements (Bauman, 2013; Taylor & Luckman, 2018). The rise of collaborative workspaces (hereafter CWS) can be seen as a part of these developments. The term collaborative workspaces is used here as an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of “spatial concepts for work, learning and recreation”, including, but not limited to coworking spaces, defined as “shared physical workspace and (often) intentional cooperation between independent workers” (Waters-Lynch et al., 2016, p.2). The degree of cooperation in CWS among coworkers can range from simple co-location to work collectivization (Avdikos & Iliopoulou, 2019). Other types of CWS include fab labs, maker spaces, or creative hubs which may particularly attract creative workers and craftspeople. CWS have been considered a “substitute” of organizations (Bacevice & Spreitzer, 2023) or quasi-organizations (de Peuter et al., 2017) for autonomous new economy workers. Naturally, sharing physical space and resources may also create tension and conflicts such as competition (Cuérel et al., 2019).

The paper combines and addresses two gaps in the literature on CWS: First, while CWS were initially an urban phenomenon, they are increasingly found outside big cities, yet empirical research on CWS in such settings is limited. Second, the growing presence of women in coworking, accompanied by the emergence of female-focused CWS (Akhavan et al., 2022) remains understudied, especially in non-urban areas.

Gender inequalities are persistent, particularly for women in rural areas (ILO, 2018), and gender challenges in such areas differ from those in urban ones (Wiest, 2016). Furthermore, previous research has questioned the reputation of CWS as egalitarian workplaces (de Peuter et al., 2017) while organization scholars emphasize that workplaces are not gender neutral. Yet, despite exacerbated gender inequalities due to the recent pandemic (Collins et al., 2021), the gender dynamics of and within such new workspaces have not been sufficiently studied.

This paper presents findings from the author’s qualitative study on gender dynamics in CWS in non-urban areas in Austria. The overall aim is to discuss the role CWS play in such contexts for their female users. The focus lies on examining aspects of gender dynamics *within* CWS, starting from the extent to which women are represented in these spaces, up to how different organizational settings answer to the specific needs of their female users. Hence, it elaborates on whether and if so how, CWS in non-urban areas have the potential to be both workplaces of *quality* and *equality* for women in the current changing world of work, whereby

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quality refers to explicit aspects such as design and spatial layout of the CWS, and equality to the more implicit, potentially “gendered substructure” (Acker, 2012) of daily informal interactions, construction of divisions based on physical spatial locations, division of labour, and symbols and images such as language, ideology, or dress within the CWS. Finally, the paper also underlines the importance of creating inclusive workplaces that address the unique needs and challenges of women in non-urban areas of Austria.

The article proceeds with a literature review on CWS and their users. Subsequently, the methodology used is provided. After introducing the two cases, the findings are presented. In the discussion, the author critically reflects on how the different organizational setups of the studied CWS meet female users’ needs. The conclusion explains why these models may be considered best practice examples and suggests improvements to inform policymakers in creating egalitarian workplaces.

## 2 CWS and their Users: Current Trends and Challenges

### 2.1 CWS in Non-Urban Areas and their Users

As CWS continue to evolve, not least through the Covid-19 crisis by which such workspaces were heavily affected, the literature on CWS too is expanding. While existing studies primarily focus on CWS in urban areas, the number of these spaces outside big cities is rising (Tomaz et al., 2021). This trend has been associated with the spread of digital services and remote work, paired with a home-working fatigue, and a renewed attractiveness of the countryside in terms of quality of life and a rise in rural tourism, as well as availability and low costs of real estate. All these factors may attract knowledge workers, digital nomads, and creative workers alike (Tomaz et al., 2021). Rural CWS differ from urban ones, for example, they are more diverse in their organization model and offer a wider range of services (Bähr et al., 2020).

European rural areas continue to experience depopulation (Eurostat, 2023a). For the Austrian context, Fischer and Weber (2014) note that concerns about employment, housing, childcare, and leisure amenities seem to drive women out of the countryside. However, some scholars have observed a trend of the 20–30 age group migrating from urban to rural areas, and several media reports and public polls indicate that the Covid-19 pandemic might have accelerated this development (Duxbury, 2021). As will be demonstrated in this paper, these in- and return-migrants constitute potential users of rural CWS.

Concerning the situation of women in rural areas, female job prospects and career options are hindered by structural deficits such as accessibility to workplaces and long commutes, supply of infrastructure including childcare, and public services, but also prevailing traditional gender agreements like the male breadwinner

and the female caregiver (Wiest, 2016). Furthermore, Eurostat data show that the gender employment gap is generally lower in cities than in rural and suburban areas (Eurostat, 2023b).

## 2.2 Women in CWS and Female-Focused CWS

Despite the increase of female users in CWS from 33% in 2012 to 51% in 2019 (Foertsch, 2020a), men predominantly hold ownership and founding roles, while the staff, often female, faces a gender pay gap (Foertsch, 2018; 2020b). Additionally, an overrepresentation of women in host and community manager roles has been observed, and the gendered, feminized nature of the care labour they perform has been recognized by scholars (Merkel, 2023).

Recently, an emergence of women-only or female-focused CWS can be observed (Akhavan et al., 2022). They are predominantly found in urban areas and sometimes also offer in-house childcare services. Originating in the USA, this trend has extended to Europe (Poussier, 2020). One study argues that their value for female workers and entrepreneurs lies in offering flexibility, a professional work environment, and vital support systems (Akhavan et al., 2022). The specific welfare policies of individual countries and the cultural norms pertaining to gender roles play a defining part in determining the services offered by these spaces, including childcare (Akhavan et al., 2022).

## 2.3 Labour and Gender Inequalities in the New World of Work and the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs)

CWS mostly house freelance knowledge workers and creatives, often facing precarious working conditions. Increasingly, remote employees or “corporate nomads” can be found in CWS too (Schmied et al., 2021, p. 8). Scholars describe restructuring processes of the world of work such as deregulation and flexibilization of employment, and new, scattered career-patterns which have brought about growing social and gender divisions (Perrons, 2002).

Work in the so-called new economy and in the CCIs has the reputation of being “cool, creative and egalitarian” and gender-neutral (Gill, 2002). However, this perception represents a surface-level image. Gill (2002) contends that it is precisely the highly valued characteristics of new work, including flexibility, informality, and autonomy, that inadvertently give rise to gender inequalities. For instance, Banks and Milestone (2011) indicate that while the digital new media sector appears to offer women more autonomous careers, traditional forms of gender inequality persist. Women appreciated the industry’s relaxed culture but felt pressured to participate in social activities and struggled to balance work with childrearing aspirations.

## 2.4 CWS: Egalitarian Workplaces of the Future?

CWS claim to be the future of work, providing a more egalitarian and open work atmosphere, easing the isolation effect of the home office, and reducing the socio-economic risk self-employed workers face. Providing their users the opportunity to socialize, network, and collaborate, CWS enable career advancement and may even act as shelters against precarity (Merkel, 2019). However, critical scholars contest that this is only true to some degree (de Peuter et al., 2017). Specific mechanisms producing inequalities in CWS have been identified, including membership curation and access, membership fees, and space layout.

Scholars have demonstrated that work organizations are gendered (Acker, 2012) and that women are disadvantaged especially in male-dominated work environments. Some forms of gendered exclusions include old boy networks—men in positions of power helping men from a similar background in business or other matters, and an informal laddish culture—promoting a particular masculinity expressed through talk at the workplace about drinking, sex, and women (Gill, 2002).

The above outlined debates raise the question of potential solutions to address these workplace inequalities within CWS. Cooperatives or worker-based ownership of hubs and CWS have been proposed as enhancement of precarious working lives and exclusionary practices (Merkel, 2019; Sandoval & Littler, 2019). Indeed, Sobering et al. (2014), reviewing gender (in)equality in worker-owned businesses and collectivist organizations, conclude that women fare better in these organizations than women working in conventional businesses.

The occurrence of female-focused or women-only CWS could be seen as a response to gender inequalities and sexism at the workplace. Consequently, this study delves into these two distinct CWS models, aiming to assess their potential to simultaneously provide quality work environments and promote gender equality for female users.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Data Collection

The study employs a qualitative research design using two CWS in rural Austria as case studies. Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out in one female-focused CWS and in one CWS functioning as a cooperative. Data collection took place between February 2023 and June 2023. 17 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 4 male and 13 female CWS users, staff, and founders were conducted to explore gender dynamics of and within CWS, focusing on the experiences and perspectives of

Table 1 Sub-Sample Participant Characteristics

Name	Age	Sociology	Occupation	Employment Status	CWS	Role in CWS	Return-migrant
Monica	30s	middle class	designer	employee of cooperative	Life Lab	member of cooperative	x
Jasmin	20s	middle class	accounting, project facilitator teaching children technology	employee of a cooperative member	Life Lab	project staff	
Heidi	50s	middle class, farmer's family	adult educator, counselor, project facilitator	employee of cooperative	Life Lab	member and co-founder of cooperative	x
Vivian	30s	middle class, farmer's family	marketing expert	self-employed	WBH	member of CWS	x
Katharina	30s	middle class	social media and PR officer	employee	WBH	former member of CWS	x
Magdalena	60s	middle class	retired teacher, media-use and addiction prevention expert, co-founder of NGO	self-employed	WBH	member of CWS	
Timna	40s	middle class	illustrator, graphic designer	self-employed	WBH	member of CWS	x
Selina	20s	middle class	administration	employee	WBH	front desk staff of CWS	
Valerie	30s	middle class	administration	employee	WBH	front desk staff of CWS	

Table 2 Analytical Categories

Analytical Category	Example in CWS	WBH	Life Lab
organizing the general requirements of work	working hours, opening times and accessibility	24/7 chipcard access for long-term or trusted users, otherwise CWS accessible only during staffed office hours	publicly accessible only during events, but drop-ins to use unoccupied workspaces possible
		premises wheelchair accessible	free use of equipment, rooms, amenities within cooperative and citizen lab upon request
organizing class hierarchies	description of job tasks and responsibilities (e.g. community manager role), hierarchical job ranks, supervisory practices	below-average fees for desk and private office rentals, reduced student fees	flexible working hours
		co-founder Ella is backbone of association behind CWS; Valerie and Selina are office managers of CWS but turn to Ella for important matters	co-founder Michael "runs" cooperative since he gets most work projects in; but flat hierarchy owing to status as cooperative
daily informal interactions on the job	e.g. chats at the coffee machine, lunch breaks	interactions between members described as collegial	cooperative members depicted as family
		women-specific topics like menopause and period pain openly discussed	women-specific topics like female-cycle based work discussed
construction of divisions along the lines of: locations in physical space, of allowed behaviour, of power, and of gender divisions of labour	gender divisions of physical space	all-female administrative and cleaning staff	attention paid to gender balance in cooperative
	gender division of labour	permanently rented offices women-first, flexible and permanent desks open to all genders	cleaning tasks equally distributed, meal preparation mainly by women
	gender division of power	almost all-female funding team	male co-founder
symbols and images: language, ideology, or dress are constructed to explain, express, reinforce, oppose divisions	dresscode	dresscode: some users and employees dress in formal business attire and wear high-heels	dresscode: casual
	symbols, language, images to explain, express, reinforce, or oppose divisions	some motivational quotes addressed to women as decoration	charta outlining values and list of good deeds done by members hung up on wall

women. Informal conversations with CWS users provided important information about their motives to work in CWS. Additionally, the author engaged in over 1000 hours of observation with varying degrees of participation while working from a rented desk during the fieldwork period and joining events at each CWS. Finally, the organizational structure as well as the physical workspace design of the CWS were scrutinized to uncover possible mechanisms through which gender (in)equality may be produced, reproduced, or reduced. The narratives presented here stem from a sub-sample of the interviews conducted.

### 3.2 Analytical Approach

After transcribing the recorded interviews collected in German, initial coding based on gendered experiences of CWS was performed. Several excerpts following the topic were selected and translated in English. These excerpts were then analysed to identify key themes. The thematic coding was informed by a framework combining insights from organization studies, particularly Joan Acker's work on "Inequality Regimes" (2006) and her "Theory of Gendered Organizations" (Acker, 2012). Inequality Regimes are "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations" (Acker, 2006, p. 443). Organizations have a "gendered substructure" which plays out in organizing processes, decision-making, but also in the design of the workplace, and rules for behaviour at work, as well as in the organization culture (Acker, 2012). Acker's departure point was the traditional work organization. As the world of work has transformed considerably since, for this study, these models were adapted to CWS, to research the "gendered practices (customs or routine way of doing things in an organization) and policies (rules or guidelines that structure organizational interactions and operations) that make up an organization" (Sargent et al., 2021, p. 2). These analytical categories based on Acker (2006) and examples thereof in each CWS are described in table 2.

## 4 Case Study Presentation

### 4.1 Life Lab<sup>2</sup> – The CWS Cooperative

Life Lab consists of a network made up of an association of so-called citizen labs (a blend of maker space and community hub), and an employment cooperative. Citizen labs can be set up in any village or city, and anyone can organize workshops and courses of any theme, provided they agree and adhere to a Charta.

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2 All names of CWS and interlocutors are pseudonymized to ensure anonymity.



This case study focuses on a Life Lab location in a town with less than 10 000 residents. In exchange for the municipality providing space in a local public building, covering rent and operational costs, Life Lab engages in projects with social impact on the local community, like educational or cultural projects. Life Lab emerged in the mid-2000s when its founder, at the time involved in a local regional development agency, recognized the need for a structure that empowers citizens to shape their future independently, breaking free from traditional political and economic constraints. The Life Lab employment cooperative draws inspiration from philosopher Frithjof Bergmann's concept of New Work (2019) stating that one should find out what one truly wants to do for a living and reflect on this in every stage of one's life. Cooperative members find their own work projects and funding, e.g. through EU-subsidized projects. Each member has their own so-called cost centre which transparently lists all incomes, expenses, and hours worked. For large-scale projects, members share tasks or employ externals under their cost centre. For instance, a long-running project of the cooperative is the development and presentation of kits that enable children in local schools to playfully discover the world of tech and digitalization. Through its successful cooperation with local businesses which provide materials, and support by the Austrian chamber of commerce, five cooperative members receive a steady income from this project.

#### *Accessibility*

Life Lab promotes an open philosophy, welcoming individuals to explore and share their talents with the community. Access to citizen lab locations is typically available during events, with key access granted to event organizers. The employment cooperative operates under a more selective model, where prospective members must present themselves and their businesses to existing members. Democratically, members decide whether the person fits with the values of the cooperative. Expansion is gradual, given the complex rules governing the cooperative. Members continually engage in many hours of discussion, trying to carefully adhere to everyone's needs.

The Life Lab location under study simultaneously hosts a branch of the citizen labs and serves as the headquarters for the employment cooperative. Cooperative members and employees have 24/7 access to the office area, while for non-members, access is trust-based. There is no conventional desk rental system, but visitors can ask to use unoccupied workspaces.

#### *Users and Staff*

Although Life Lab initiators wish for people from all spheres of society to join citizen labs, this is not always achieved and according to one interlocutor, usually, event organizers and participants share the same social circles. In the citizen labs, the age spectrum ranges from 20 to almost 80 with equal representation of both genders. The employment cooperative exhibits a similar demographic diversity, ranging from

a 20-year-old high school graduate to a 65-year-old soon-to be retiree. One interlocutor recounted how a new male member was not accepted into the cooperative because men would then be the majority, demonstrating the importance attributed to gender balance. The members' professions are diverse: from life coaches to architects, designers, and consultants, they come from different career paths and now work on both individual and common projects.

#### 4.2 Women Business Hub—Room for Female Entrepreneurs

Women Business Hub (hereafter WBH) is located in a small town counting less than 5 000 residents in a thinly populated region of Austria. It can be considered a conventional coworking space with a special focus on women. The founder Ella, who is also a local politician, was informed about an impending labour shortage in the region by 2030. One way to face this challenge was to untap the potential of women who often fulfilled unpaid care work at home or worked part-time. Part of Ella's research involved her personally visiting local female entrepreneurs. She found that many women ran their business from home, often because of child caring duties. As she communicated, the existence of their businesses and kind of services offered were unknown even to the women's neighbours. Subsequently, Ella, along with a team of six, founded an association with the goal to support local female entrepreneurs, providing them not only with a physical room—a professional space to work from—but also room in the sense of visibility, and WBH was born. To facilitate unpaid care work disproportionately carried out by women, WBH collaborates with a local childcaring facility and an elderly care home. However, this collaboration is limited to solely informing CWS tenants about the offer, rather than involving financial benefits for its use. WBH is built on three pillars: events and wellness, mentoring, and coworking. One floor houses an event room for workshops and yoga or birth preparation classes. It also accommodates practice rooms for lease for health and wellness practitioners. One floor higher, the coworking space with a small conference room, a coaching room, private offices and two open plan offices as well as a kitchenette and several hangout areas can be found.

##### *Accessibility*

All floors and rooms are wheelchair accessible with one accessible toilet per floor. WBH has a variety of space- and price offers. A reduced student fee is available for the rental of desks in the open plan office. Rooms and desks can be booked, reserved, and paid online and once purchased, used flexibly within a certain period for hours, months, or a year. Long-term and trusted users have 24/7 chipcard access. For everyone else, WBH is accessible only during staffed hours on weekdays. The rent for a desk in a shared office is slightly below the country-wide average of 250 Euros (Coworking Insights, 2022) Despite being a female-focused CWS, desks

in the open plan offices are rented out to male users too. Female users are given priority for the private offices.

### *Users and Staff*

WBH is founded and managed primarily by women, with a mostly female board of association. Staff members, including front desk personnel and cleaner, are also female. A few male users were present during the research period. The user profile is diverse, with an age range of 25 to 60. Many female users were in a life stage involving a return to work after having children, retraining or advanced training, or becoming self-employed. WBH's mentoring program sought to facilitate these processes. Occupations ranged from psychologist, marketing expert, graphic designer, consultant, to a midwife-turned entrepreneur. Many users renting a flexible desk in the shared office typically dedicated one or two days per week to focused work on specific tasks or projects, combined with work from home or at their company's premises.

## 5 Findings

### 5.1 CWS in Rural Areas: A Hub with an Urban Feel for Return-Migrants and CCI Workers?

In both case studies, many interlocutors had lived in bigger cities or abroad before returning to the rural areas. Usually, this return-migration occurred to the place the person or their partner came from. Life Lab's co-founder argued that for successful CWS in rural areas and for sustainable regional development, young people should be encouraged to leave their village, be inspired by the world, ideally return with ideas and experiences gained, and share them with the local community. Often, these ideas and experiences of young people leaving their region stem from urban environments, such as the desire for cultural spaces and meeting points for locals, like CWS. This is illustrated by the following vignette from Monica, a member of the Life Lab employment cooperative:

*There are so many people who lived in the city before but now have children and come back to the rural area. They bring this idea, they want to keep using, or want these city offers in the countryside. ... It makes them miss the city less. I met many people, especially maybe in the creative sector, that lived in the city.*

A connection can be drawn here to the term habitual urbanity, derived from Bourdieu's *habitus*, which Dirksmeier (2006) uses to describe practices urban dwellers use to cope with risks and opportunities the city offers them. It seems that

back-to-rural migrants are seeking habitual urbanity and that CWS are places where they can find and exercise it.

Another common theme was an increased quality of life by moving back to the countryside. Factors like being close to nature, family, and friends, but also affordable housing and less competition on the local labour market were mentioned frequently. This finding is summed up by Katharina, 30, a former user of WBH:

*I moved back because of family. My boyfriend is from here too and in the long run, we saw ourselves living here. It just worked out well: we travelled for six months, I quit my job, and we gave up our apartment in Vienna, and then we were thinking, ok, let's try to set up our lives here. ... I also moved back because of my friends. Many of my friends were in Vienna and most of them returned at the end of their 20s. ... Affordable housing was a benefit too, of course, because now, we have a much bigger apartment and pay much less.*

Katharina's statement points to another communality these back-to-rural migration accounts share, namely that they usually occur at a particular age and stage of life. Ella from WBH stated that the majority of those returning to their region are between 25 and 35, often in the process of starting a family or when they have young children. Monica describes how, as a single mum, she valued the support of her family and of Life Lab as her workplace, when she returned to her region after having lived abroad:

*I think it's the classic thing when you have children, ..., then you repeat your own childhood a bit, or then you want to have the environment that you had as a child. And I also want our children to grow up in nature. ... It was actually important to me to have family around me, I still have three siblings, they are all older and they each have three children, so there are a lot of cousins who all live in the area, about 20–30 minutes drive away. They actually all settled here. ... Just before the daughter was born, we separated, then he moved out ... right now I need the environment even stronger. Yes, it was more like that, the rural context, and the family nearby, probably. And then that happened with Life Lab as an employer, which was really great, actually.*

Finally, several users of the two CWS worked in the CCIs, many of whom were also return migrants. A growing body of literature on CCI work in rural contexts has developed over the past decade, arguing that a rising number of knowledge workers and creatives are moving outside cities, establishing a "Rural Creative Class" (Herslund, 2012) in reference to Richard Florida's (2002) urban-centric Creative Class theory. Fleeing high urban rents in the hope of finding small rural communi-

ties offering a higher quality of life to settle in, they start their businesses working from their country homes or commuting to nearby larger cities (Herslund, 2012). The present case studies confirmed this thesis, and interlocutors added more factors:

*In the design field, there is of course not that much available in rural areas, you probably have to look for jobs yourself. Although that is more now, I think, so here, especially in [region] there is actually a lot going on. Now I think it's better. ... Now with the Capital of Culture too, you can see that the cultural theme and stuff is important to them. That there are already many people behind it. (Monica)*

Similarly, Vivian, a marketing expert and user of WBH reported she found a job in her field easier than in Austria's capital:

*The competition in Vienna is too hard and here in my region, I have a unique selling point. I also saw that some of my clients appreciated that I come from a farmer's family, they liked my "earthy" background.*

## 5.2 Meeting Rural CWS User's Needs within Two Diverse Organizational Setups

During the interviews and conversations, several workplace needs of female users, and consequently, how they were met within the specific organizational setup, emerged. The findings also illustrate how the organizational environments were experienced with respect to gender.

### *A Sense of Security*

In the Life Lab employment cooperative, members experienced a sense of security primarily through financial safety. As opposed to being freelancers, they earn a monthly salary. In addition, a safety pot protecting members of unforeseen circumstances such as prolonged sick leaves to which every member contributes at the beginning of each year is available. Furthermore, cooperative members benefit from limited personal liability. Finally, Life Lab members found a sense of security through transparency, as everyone has complete insight into project budgets and wages of each member. In WBH, the notion of security was perceived more as a physical and mental safe space. WBH provides a range of spaces for retreat, when necessary, as well as numerous communal areas. Several female interlocutors highlighted the unique atmosphere they encountered when exclusively women were present in a room or during events. They experienced it as a motivating, positive, non-competitive, supportive, and encouraging environment. Indeed, other studies confirm that mutual aid and compassion may arise from social interaction with other coworkers and hosts, thereby easing highly individualized and often precarious work situations

Table 3 Summary of Findings

	Sense of Security	Flexibility	Wellbeing	Personal and Professional Development	Networking	A Room of One's Own
WBH	physical and mental safe space	flexible space offers and pricing	ergonomic amenities  course offers for physical exercise, workshops on female health  practice rooms for health and wellness practitioners	mentoring program for women in various stages of work and different types of employment	monthly free networking events open also to non-members	distinct physical space away from home
Life Lab	financial safety  limited personal liability  transparency	flexible working times,  high degree of self-organization without risks of self-employment	emphasis on mental wellbeing  access to external resources, integrated wellbeing activities	try out and learn- mentality  opportunity to give and attend workshops in citizen labs  educational leave encouraged	free events at open citizen labs to meet local community	professional workspace

(Gerdenitsch et al., 2016; Rådman et al., 2023). Additionally, in WHB, female users appreciated that women-specific topics were not considered taboo in the workplace:

*I simply appreciate the fact that there's incredible collegiality and that we can often genuinely have a good laugh, even about things like, for example ... menopause or about things where I think, if it were mostly men, it might be a bit more challenging. So, it's these women-specific topics that we can actually discuss quite openly, and I value that here. (Magdalena)*

*Women also understand each other on an emotional level. When I say, 'Oh, today: PMS,' I don't even need to explain further, and everyone knows how you feel, and they take care of you. So, you are simply supported here, and that indeed makes it special. That's certainly what sets it apart, yes. (Timna)*

Female members of the cooperative too highlighted the openness of other members towards discussing similar topics like the possibility of adopting a female-cycle-based approach to work.

### *Flexibility*

Flexibility, along with convenience and the separation of work and family life have previously been described as characteristics of CWS that may contribute to satisfying key autonomy needs of their users (Merrell et al., 2022). Both CWS studied accommodate the unpredictable work patterns of freelancers and self-employed individuals by offering flexitime arrangements that balance members' professional and personal needs. Heidi from Life Lab thinks the cooperative may be particularly attractive to women as a workplace because of the high degree of self-organization. The following vignettes of two other female members confirm this:

*I have two little kids, and I'm a single parent raising them on my own. The annual flexitime model is really ... For me, self-employment wouldn't be an option because it would stress me out too much. Especially in my design field, I don't have recurring clients, these are always unique projects. That would be too hectic for me. But by working for projects under Michael's [co-founder and member of Life Lab] cost centre, I already know I can plan the year ahead, I know what I have to do, and I'm still relatively flexible with my time management. That really helps me a lot. (Monica)*

*Last week I was at work, and I noticed I couldn't really concentrate. After half an hour, I went back home because it was just pointless. So, I did some yoga and took a long walk and everything. I think it's super cool that you can just schedule it like that. (Jasmin)*

In WBH, flexibility was seen additionally in the various space offers, different pricing packages, the around-the-clock access, and its accessibility for people with disabilities.

### *Wellbeing*

Both physical and mental wellbeing were prioritized in the two CWS. The physical dimension of wellbeing was more pronounced in WBH. Aside from ergonomic office chairs, natural-light flooded rooms and a pleasing aesthetic, an entire floor is dedicated to health professions such as massage therapists. Moreover, WBH hosts weekly sport classes and workshops around women's wellbeing and health. In Life Lab, besides yoga classes offered in the citizen lab, the emphasis was placed more on mental wellbeing. Members appreciated being asked about their current energy level in meetings, and always felt looked out for. In case of group dynamic issues,

external support resources can be accessed. Furthermore, wellbeing activities are part of the cooperative's yearly planning.

### *Personal and Professional Development*

Both CWS emphasized personal growth and skill enhancement, fostering a culture of continuous learning. The co-founder described Life Lab as a space to *try out and learn*, and members were explicitly encouraged to take educational leave. WBH offers a mentoring program particularly designed for women. Having made use of this opportunity when she aimed to re-enter the workforce after giving birth, Vivian expressed that this initiative motivated her to venture into self-employment and take pride in being an entrepreneur. Bacevice and Spreitzer (2023) also note that access to mentorship, knowledge sharing and networking in CWS may benefit autonomous workers who otherwise might have difficulties accessing these offers.

### *Networking*

While the importance of networking was not particularly stressed at Life Lab, it held significant relevance at WBH. WBH organized monthly networking events on-site and streamed online. They were open to both CWS members and non-members and attracted women from villages across the region. The events were facilitated by either CWS staff or members of the association backing WBH. They typically started with a round of introduction and a short meditation. This was followed by one woman presenting her business or profession. The observation at one such event revealed that collaboration, idea sharing, and establishing professional relationships among participants, even of the same field, was actively encouraged. Above all, however, it contributed to the visibility of already existing female-owned businesses in the region. Similarly, in a study on self-employed women working from CWS, participants described business networks as resulting in better prospects for professional collaboration (Rodríguez-Modroño, 2021).

### *A Room of One's Own*

Interviews with female interlocutors consistently revealed a common theme: appreciating the opportunity to leave the domestic environment and work in a distinct physical setting. Many women admitted to getting distracted by household chores when working from home, a concern not raised by any male interlocutor. This illustrates how women may have, often unconsciously, internalized traditional societal expectations regarding gender roles, underscoring the significance of workspaces outside the home for women. Indeed, Rodríguez-Modroño (2021) showed how women used working from a CWS as a strategy to discard traditional gender roles and a gendered division of labour.

The notion of a "room of one's own" is drawn from Virginia Woolf's (1929) essay arguing that women require a private space and financial independence to foster creativity and effectively pursue their work. Two interview accounts demonstrate



this concept, while also showing that each woman attributed a unique and personal meaning to this alternate physical space: Vivian's decision to work from WBH was influenced by her desire for a more professional working environment. While she has a designated office at home, she found it ill-fitting to receive clients due to the constant need she felt to clean or tend to guests' needs. WBH eliminates this issue, offering her a professional setting, effectively becoming her designated *professional space*. Monica from Life Lab valued the opportunity to interact with colleagues at her workplace:

*It's also just that you meet people, I'm usually alone at home with the children, and then you're looking forward to exchanging with adults or adult topics of conversation.*

Consequently, Life Lab can be seen as her *adult space*.

Scholars have pointed out the benefits of CWS as separate work environments. Merkel (2023, p. 86) considers working from a CWS a possible "form of self-care", primarily due to its role in establishing clear boundaries between work and home, reducing work-family conflicts, and fostering focused work environments (Orel, 2019; Robelski et al., 2019).

## 6 Discussion and Conclusion

This paper prompts a crucial question: Can CWS be considered egalitarian workplaces for women? While there has been a rise in female representation and efforts to create supportive environments, challenges persist. Addressing gender dynamics and designing workspaces that consider both explicit and implicit needs remains vital for realizing the full potential of CWS in non-urban areas as equitable spaces in the evolving world of work. The exploration of how two distinct CWS models cater to the needs of female rural knowledge workers revealed insights into their organizational structures and the provision of crucial elements such as flexibility, a sense of security, wellbeing, personal development, networking, and a distinct workspace environment.

The Life Lab cooperative emerged as a promising alternative to the precarious employment conditions frequently faced by freelancers, offering a balance between flexible time management and a sense of security by receiving a regular income. The cooperative's emphasis on shared responsibilities, commitment to democratic decision-making, transparency, community-oriented leadership, non-hierarchical structure, and autonomous work routines allows members to navigate different life stages with economic stability and contributes to its members' overall wellbeing. The data presented endorses previous literature on the organizational structure of CWS suggesting that this model may enhance gender equality. However, as was

confirmed by interlocutors, cooperatives often face challenges of initiation, operation, and access to necessary resources, including time (Sandoval & Littler, 2019).

Women Business Hub (WBH) showcases a unique approach to addressing the specific needs of women living and working in rural areas. The safe space concept resonates strongly within WBH, offering women a supportive and empowering environment to counteract potential negative experiences from previous workplaces, for example by allowing space for female-specific topics. The emphasis on physical and mental wellbeing is reflected in the extensive services provided, ranging from ergonomic facilities to workshops and personal development opportunities. The distinctive value of WBH lies in its role as a platform elevating women entrepreneurs, providing visibility and recognition they might not receive elsewhere, especially through the networking events, arguably particularly important in rural areas. The findings about female-focused CWS as flexible, professional work environment and vital support systems for women (Akhavan et al., 2022) were confirmed. However, integrating childcare services into CWS remains challenging due to the complexity or absence of regulations governing this aspect. Financial incentives given by the state or employer to use child- and elderly care institutions close to the CWS, are desired. Nonetheless, combining such services with *women-only* spaces is questionable since this could perpetuate the gendered division of care responsibilities.

Regarding the specific elements of gendered organizations scrutinized in the analysis, both CWS scored highly as accessible and egalitarian workplaces. The access barriers were low, as using the desks at Life Lab is free of charge, and WBH offers discounts and below-average fees. Both CWS can be used 24/7 by regulars, however, trust plays a role. The flexible, open plan layout and workspace design, as well as the equipment of both spaces appealed to the users, whereby ergonomic chairs, pleasing aesthetics, natural light, and a comfortable temperature were particularly valued by female users. The premises of WBH are fully wheelchair accessible. Observations revealed that the workplace culture at WBH was slightly more formal than that of Life Lab. The staff and many users, regardless of their gender, dressed in business attire, and the interactions between members were described as collegial. In Life Lab, members of the cooperative depicted each other as family, and the dress code was casual. With respect to the division of labour and hierarchies within the spaces, notably, in both cases, members and users attributed an indispensable role to the founders in terms of the management of the CWS, which observations confirmed. In Life Lab, interlocutors highlighted the absence of gender-specific divisions in office cleaning duties. Nonetheless, observations indicated that female users typically took on the responsibility of meal preparation. In sum, the study revealed that the specific organizational structures of the two CWS contributed to an enhancement but not elimination of the gendered structures of a workplace. While there were no explicit accounts or observations of sexism, unequal treatment or exclusion based on gender, there were differences in how the physical workspace and atmosphere of the CWS was experienced by female and male users. Both cases exemplify the importance

of providing spaces for women that transcend mere physical environments. The possibility to discuss subjects like menopause was attributed to the predominantly female work environment, a level of openness and comfort perhaps not attainable in male-dominated settings. Furthermore, the room of one's own concept, wherein the workspace becomes a much-needed place of separation from home, is prominently evident in the narratives. The CWS function not only as physical work locations but also as catalysts for personal and professional development, enabling networking, support, and skill enhancement. Arguably, given that women, compared to men, spend an unproportionally large amount of their time carrying out unpaid care- and housework in their homes, they have fewer opportunities and less time to leave their homes for a different space. Consequently, and as the presented vignettes show, such alternative spaces for women are crucial.

In conclusion, CWS should not be regarded as panacea for workplace inequalities for women in non-urban areas, and much remains to be done, since most gender inequalities are structural ones, such as various gender gaps and traditional societal expectations regarding gender roles. However, the two presented models of CWS can be regarded as examples of egalitarian workplaces and as important alternative space offers. CWS in non-urban areas are still a young, under-researched phenomenon. More in-depth research is required to inform policy makers and CWS operators alike on how to create more inclusive and egalitarian work environments. Importantly, strategies to address gender inequalities at the workplace need to recognize the diverse experiences and situations of women working in these spaces in non-urban settings. With regards to typologies of non-urban CWS and their users, the existence of female-focused CWS and cooperatives, as well as the increasing importance of return-migrants and what they bring to CWS should be considered. Finally, scholarly work on gender inequalities in new workspaces needs to be expanded to research the experiences of *all* genders and how they intersect with other factors of discrimination.

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