

Sisters (can't) unite! Wages as macro-political and the gendered power orders of corporatism

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In addition to political parties and the government, trade union confederations and employer organizations are major power players in the Finnish labour market, policymaking and the wider society. This article analyses the significant role of the Finnish corporatist regime in creating and maintaining the gendered hierarchies of the labour market, including the gender pay gap. Using the case of the Finnish nurses' industrial action in 2007, our analysis highlights the capacity of the corporatist regime to resist change in current wage relativities and effectively block attempts made to challenge the status quo. This article describes how wages are macro-political, shaped by political processes, negotiations, power relations and vested interests of central stakeholders within the Finnish corporatist regime. The analysis focuses on the problem representations through which the actors articulate either their attempt to increase wages or to maintain the status quo, which makes their vested interests, as well as politics, visible.

KEYWORDS

collective bargaining, corporatism, equal pay, industrial action, wages as macro-political

1 | INTRODUCTION

This article analyses the significant role the Finnish corporatist regime has had, and still has, in creating and maintaining the gendered hierarchies of the labour market, including the gender pay gap. *Corporatism* and *corporatist regime* refer to the significant power trade union confederations and employer organizations have over labour market issues,

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policy and legislation (e.g., Siaroff, 1999; Woldendorp, 1997). The social partners and political parties together form the Finnish corporatist regime. The corporatist regime has proved to be highly resistant to attempts made, for example, to challenge current wage relativities or claim equal pay for feminized occupations. However, the Finnish corporatist regime, though a strong institution, is not a monolith. As this article will exemplify, there are different actors with their own interests to represent. Even when seemingly similar, these interests may diverge based on social categories, such as the gender, class or ethnicity of the group the trade union represents.

As we were writing this article, 11 years after the 2007 industrial action by Finnish nurses that formed the basis for this study, the negotiation process for collective agreements had just been finalized. During the negotiations, power struggles between the central actors in the process received daily coverage in the Finnish media. At the same time, in Finnish public debate, the gender pay gap is typically addressed as a matter of gender segregation in the labour market and a question of individual choice and attitudes. This creates an interesting situation in which the impact of labour market organizations on wage-setting is simultaneously acknowledged and silenced: it is acknowledged when addressing pay increases for certain industries but silenced when addressing the gender pay gap.

In this article, we highlight the importance of studying wages and equal pay as gendered macro-political power struggles. By macro-political, we refer to institutions such as collective bargaining within the Finnish corporatist regime, which still remains highly coordinated, and in which central actors negotiate the terms of employment for most employees within the Finnish labour market; and party politics, which also have a fundamental impact on wages in the Finnish public sector through budgets and resource allocation. For understanding the macro-political dynamics of wage determination, we coin the concept of *wages as macro-political*. Studying wages as macro-political refers to understanding wages as part of gender power orders (Nousiainen, Holli, Kantola, Saari, & Hart, 2013) and as subject to ongoing, gendered struggles between interest groups over power and legitimacy. When analysing equal pay as a political issue, it is easier to understand why it remains a highly contested topic as well as why promoting equal pay continues to be challenging despite a national and international legal framework that includes it (e.g., Finnish Act on Equality between Women and Men, 1986/609, 232/2005, 1329/2014; ILO, 1951; European Commission, 2006).

The Finnish context provides an interesting case for studying wages as a macro-political phenomenon. In coordinated labour markets such as the Finnish labour market, wages are not only or even mainly shaped by intra-organizational practices or power relations within organizations, but by political processes in the form of wage negotiations between trade unions and employer organizations, and in party politics and the macroeconomic frame shaped by the government. Thereafter, pay practices are implemented in organizations, where their politics become less visible. Thus, we argue that wages are deeply political and should be analysed as such. While this may seem obvious, the macro-political perspective has received less attention in the organization studies literature on wages and equal pay, which often focuses on micro- or meso-political perspectives such as politics and gendered practices in organizations, and the systems of wage determination such as job evaluation (e.g., Acker, 1990; Koskinen Sandberg, 2017; Steinberg, 1990).

While scholarship on wages exists in fields such as sociology, political economy, industrial relations and organization studies (examples include Acker, 1989; Conley, 2014; Figart, Mutari, & Power, 2002; Gerhart & Rynes, 2003; Heneman, 2003; Mann, 2007), economics has been highly influential for the way in which we currently understand wages. Human capital theory, the role of the market in shaping wages, as well as explaining wage differences with chosen variables have become widely accepted ways of understanding what wages are (classics include Becker, 1994; Mincer, 1958; Oaxaca, 1973; for critiques, see Austen, Jefferson, & Preston, 2013; Grimshaw & Rubery, 2002). With this article, we provide an alternative way to study wages and gender pay gaps via power relations, politics and negotiation between central actors. We illuminate our insights with an analysis of the Finnish nurses' industrial action in 2007. The analysis focuses on the *problem representations* (Bacchi, 1999), ways of framing the problem of unequal pay, through which the actors articulate their attempt to either increase wages or maintain the status quo. In addition, the analysis identifies agonistic adversaries, actors and institutions that have power to change wage relativities (e.g., Saari, 2013; Mouffe, 2000). Our research questions are:

1. How can wages and equal pay be understood and conceptualized as macro-political questions?

2. In making the claim for wage increases for nurses, how were the sources of wage inequality and corresponding remedies articulated? What kinds of problem representations of wages and equal pay were constructed from these discourses? Who were identified as agonistic adversaries, for instance, actors and institutions with the power to change wage relativities?
3. How did the Finnish corporatist system react to the claims made and what were the implications?

The nurses' industrial action is particularly interesting for several reasons: the 2007 collective bargaining round took place just before the 2008 economic crisis, which hit Finland hard. During the crisis, Finland was stuck with unusually high wage increases, since other industries demanded wage increases as well. To this day, the nurses' industrial action has been blamed for the loss of the competitiveness of the country's economy and is used as a counterargument for lifting feminized occupations of the public sector out of a wage pothole. The case is also interesting because industrial action organized by feminized occupations is rather rare in Finland, and because the occupational groups in question are registered and practical nurses. Both are iconic, feminized occupations in public sector care work. (e.g., Briskin, 2012; Henttonen, LaPointe, Pesonen, & Vanhala, 2013). The case was also important because it made visible the dynamics that prevent wage relativities from changing and the gender pay gap from narrowing. There was the electoral campaign promise made by the National Coalition Party on wage increases for undervalued, feminized public sector occupations and a €150 million budget for the increases. Still, the wage increases were blocked by the dynamics of the corporatist regime.

The data used in the analysis comprised two background interviews with informants who were central in the 2007 industrial action, and magazines produced by the action's central actors: TEHY – The Union of Health and Social Care Professionals; SUPER – The Finnish Union of Practical Nurses; and KT – Local Government Employers. These texts served as effective material for retrospective analysis of the 2007 industrial action, as they represent strategic communication targeted to the organizations' members as well as other stakeholders. We analysed editorials and chairperson's columns produced between 2006 and 2008 – that is, before, during and after the industrial action. We built a description of how the events unfolded and traced the main problem representations, ways of constructing the problem, of unequal pay in the data. We also examined the ways in which gender and class are constructed in these problem representations. In addition, we evaluated how the Finnish corporatist labour market system both enables the politicization of wages and makes the implementation of measures to promote equal pay very difficult.

This article is structured as follows. First, we discuss ways of conceptualizing wages and present our contribution to this discussion: the concept of *wages as macro-political*. Second, we describe the Finnish corporatist regime and its institutions. Third, we discuss the undervaluation of feminized care work. Fourth, we elaborate on our methodological approach and research data. Fifth, we frame our analysis by presenting the case under investigation in more detail. Sixth, research results, including the problem representations of unequal pay, are presented. Finally, our findings and contributions are discussed in relation to our theoretical framework.

2 | BRINGING MACRO-POLITICS INTO THEORIES OF WAGES

To understand the dynamics of the gender pay gap, it is crucial to understand wages. A wage is much more than just a fee in exchange for labour. Rather, it can be viewed as a political arena in which people's identity, culture and politics are negotiated. Wage is a critical component in forming social categories and hierarchies of race, class, gender and citizenship (Mann, 2007). The point of wage being a political arena and a critical component in forming hierarchies between occupational groups within the Finnish labour market will also become clear in our analysis of the problem representations (e.g., Bacchi, 1999) of equal pay articulated by the central actors of the 2007 nurses' industrial action.

In coordinated labour markets such as in Finland, wages are determined via collective bargaining between trade unions and employer organizations, resulting in the implementation of wage levels and pay systems across the entire sector. Collective bargaining is also a political arena where the power relation between central actors are negotiated. In addition to social partners, Finnish government and political party ideologies have also been embedded in the

macroeconomic context of wage determination. As our example highlights, collective bargaining processes and related negotiations can become highly politicized in certain circumstances.

As stated in the introduction, much of the previous scholarship on wages and equal pay has been conducted within the field of economics. In mainstream economics, wages are seen as based on markets as well as human capital factors of individual workers, such as education and work experience (classics include Becker, 1994; Mincer, 1958). In these approaches, gender segregation of the labour market is typically offered as an explanation for a large part of the observable gender pay gap. Rubery, Grimshaw, and Figueiredo (2005) argued that conceptualizing the gender pay gap only with productivity factors is clearly at odds with scholarship done within fields such as sociology. Focusing only on productivity denies the role of social actors. In heterodox economics using institutional approaches (e.g., Austen et al., 2013), wages are seen as shaped by the institutional context.

Figart et al. (2002) have categorized implicit theories behind equal pay debates. Debates and previous scholarship have focused on three dimensions of wages: wages as a price, wages as a living and wages as a social practice. *Wages as a price* refers to the mainstream economics perspective mentioned above, where wages are seen as being based on investments in human capital (e.g., Becker, 1994; Mincer, 1958) and shaped by market forces. *Wages as a living* comprises studies and debates on living wages (e.g., Luce, 2004) and minimum wages (e.g., Rubery, 2003). From this perspective, wages are seen as a means to provide a living for workers and their families. The third area of scholarship is *wages as a social practice*, where wages are seen as shaping and reflecting deeply embedded, shared cultural understandings of 'appropriate places' for workers of different classes, genders and ethnicities (see Acker, 1990, 2006; Skeggs, 1997). Wages serve these three functions simultaneously (Figart et al., 2002).

In this article, we highlight that wages are profoundly political and should be analysed as such. By definition, politics refers to the distribution of power and resources via decision-making. By 'political', we refer to *macro-level politics*, such as party politics, macroeconomic frameworks of governments and centralized collective bargaining, such as the type found in Finland. We coin the concept of *wages as macro-political* to describe how wages are shaped by political processes, negotiations, power relations and vested interests of central stakeholders within the macroeconomic and political framework. The macro-political dimension of wages has indeed been discussed in some studies (e.g., Acker, 1989; Eveline & Todd, 2009; Figart et al., 2002; Mann, 2007; Rubery & Grimshaw, 2015), but few studies have focused on the macro-politics of wage determination and equal pay within a Nordic corporatist regime (e.g., Koskinen Sandberg, 2018, Saari, 2016). Viewing wages as macro-political incorporates institutions, power relations and agency. Current wage relativities are not written in stone; although not easy, they can be renegotiated.

3 | THE FINNISH CORPORATIST REGIME AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

The Nordic countries, Finland among them, have often been viewed as model countries for gender equality. Being gender-equal is a strong narrative in Finland, which also makes studying gendered structures and power relations in Finnish society and its labour market particularly interesting. The Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2017) ranked Finland as the third-most gender-equal country in the world. Yet, in the Nordic comparison, Finland has the most gender-segregated labour market and a relatively wide gender pay gap: 16.7 per cent in 2016 (Grönlund, Halldén, & Magnusson, 2016). In the Nordic countries, wages and equal pay are commonly understood to be the responsibility of labour market organizations, which has in turn slowed down the development of the legal framework around equal pay (Fransson, 2000; Nummijärvi, 2004). It has been conventionally assumed that wages and equal pay cannot be directly influenced by either the government or politicians (Saari, 2016).

A distinctive feature of the Finnish context is the corporatist regime, which implies significant power that the trade union confederations and employer organizations have over wage determination, policymaking and legislation. The Finnish corporatist regime is a strong institution with a long legacy (Koskinen Sandberg, 2018). One of the reasons why equal pay policies have not been very successful in narrowing the gender pay gap in Finland is the corporatist

labour market structure, which is based on consensual agreements between employers, employees and the government. In Finland, both the trade unions and employer confederations are well organized: union density is relatively high at 64.5 per cent (Ahtiainen, 2015) and most employers are also organized. In Finland, the working conditions of employees are based on legislation and collective agreements. Between 1968 and 2006, general agreements on terms and conditions of employment, and the level of pay rises, were negotiated in tripartite cooperation as a part of income policy agreements. In these, the government was one of the negotiators. Even after 2006, the collective bargaining system has remained rather centralized and strongly affected by the corporatist tradition of negotiating.

Although equal pay is a widely accepted principle and goal in Finnish society, practices promoting unequal pay have gone unnoticed and remain widespread in the Finnish labour market (Suoranta, 2009). This situation is not the result of a lack of political articulation on the importance of equal pay. Quite the contrary, equal pay has been included in government programmes and policies since the 1960s. Equal pay has been promoted via institutions, including political parties, labour market organizations and the judicial system, through legislation, gender equality policies and programmes, collective agreements and governmental platforms. Yet the gender pay gap has remained almost the same for the last 30 years. Formally, all central actors support the shared goals, but there are practices that work against these shared goals. These include behind-the-scenes power struggles between the actors, strong gender segregation of the labour market and shared, tacit knowledge on the 'appropriate' wage differences between jobs held by employees of different gender, class, ethnicity or educational background (e.g., Figart et al., 2002).

4 | THE UNDERVALUATION OF FEMINIZED CARE WORK

The occupations under investigation in our Finnish example, registered nursing and practical nursing, can be seen as embodiments of undervalued feminized care work. This undervaluation has its roots in the perception that care work 'comes naturally' for women and is conducted in the private sphere, without pay (Haggrén, 2005; see also Henttonen et al., 2013). Today, registered nursing is a skilled occupation that requires the completion of a bachelor's degree, while practical nursing requires tertiary qualifications. Yet even now, the gendered history of these occupations is reflected in the wage levels of the nurses. Haggrén (2005) wrote that in the 1940s registered nursing was viewed as a job through which young, middle-class, unmarried women could fulfil 'social motherhood', the societal role attributed to Finnish women at the time (see also Rantalaiho, 1994). Claiming higher wages was not seen as suitable for these women. Consequently, the status and monetary undervaluation of the occupation in the Finnish labour market has been a relevant question for decades. Relatively high societal prestige, but low wages, characterize the occupation even today.

This undervaluation can be seen as a product of intersecting gender, class and race relations. Within health care and hospitals, as work organizations, the organizational hierarchy and perceived value of conducted work are based on gendered, racialized and class-based processes (e.g., Cleland Silva, 2016). These together produce wages for physicians, registered nurses and practical nurses, with (male) physicians comprising the top end of the hierarchy, (female) registered nurses comprising the middle and (female) practical nurses comprising the lower end, with more ethnically diverse nurse assistants comprising the bottom.

In previous research about collective agreements in the Finnish local government sector, the ways in which these culturally gendered valuations of jobs and occupations have become embedded in formal wage determination practices have been conceptualized as *institutionalized undervaluation* (Koskinen Sandberg, Törnroos, & Kohvakka, 2018). Institutionalized undervaluation originates in socially constructed, gendered understandings of appropriate wages for work conducted by men and women (see also Austen et al., 2013; Figart et al., 2002). However, once undervaluation becomes part of formal wage determination practices, it is more difficult to detect. Undervaluation is not just the result of historical processes, but is an ongoing process shaped by many actors, such as employers, governments, trade unions and other social actors (Acker, 1989; Grimshaw & Rubery, 2007; Suoranta, 2009). In this article, we highlight the relevance of these actors and politics.

4.1 | Nurses, trade unions and equal pay

Nurses have gone on strike or engaged in industrial action in many countries to protest low wages or poor working conditions more generally (e.g., Briskin, 2011, 2012). In Finland, the undervaluation of nurses' work has been an ongoing topic of discussion for decades. It has also been on the agenda of collective bargaining and resulted in industrial action, as described in this article (see also Henttonen et al., 2013). The issue of nurses' wages that do not match job demands remains difficult to resolve, especially in the Finnish corporatist setting, which does not allow one occupational group to receive pay increases when others do not. The male-dominated industrial relations system also sees women's militancy as threatening (e.g., Briskin, 2011).

The role of trade unions in relation to equal pay objectives varies according to the industrial relations systems of the country in question. For example, in the UK, trade unions have been active in using the law to claim equal pay for their female members (e.g., Conley, 2014; Guillaume, 2015); in Australia there have also been successful equal pay cases (e.g., Austen et al., 2013); yet in Finland, this is unheard of. Instead, trade unions in Finland have negotiated binding collective agreements nationwide and would not be in a position to challenge such agreements. Other initiatives for equal pay for women have been rather rare among Finnish trade unions and equality bargaining (e.g., Heery, 2006; Williamson, 2012) is typically not a part of their agendas.

In Finland, like in many other countries, women's wages used to be significantly lower than men's, according to collective agreements (e.g., Rose, 1988; Suoranta, 2009) and even by governmental decisions, which recommended different wage levels for men and women in 1945 in the so-called *wage regulation decision* (Bergholm, 2005). Trade unions actively promoted the so-called family wages for male breadwinners, while women's earnings were viewed as supplementary. Male unionists participated in exclusionary strategies since working women threatened their position in both the labour market and the domestic sphere (e.g., Guillaume, 2015; Rose, 1988; Walby, 1990). In both spheres, it was in the interest of men that women remain in a subordinate role. It was also in the interest of employers, who received cheaper female labour. The gendered history of the labour market is still present in its currently gendered structures. More recently, the Finnish centralized collective bargaining system has protected male privilege in the labour market through the strong tendency to uphold gendered divisions in the market and in collective bargaining. In collective bargaining, gendered power relations operate so that women's interests tend to become marginalized in the process (Dawson, 2014).

5 | DATA AND METHODS

In the analysis of the data, we applied a policy-constructivist approach, or 'What is the problem represented to be?', which was developed by Bacchi (1999) for studying policy responses. Bacchi argued that every policy proposal contains an explicit or implicit diagnosis of the problem. The way in which the problem is defined will offer specific kinds of solutions to solve it. According to Bacchi, social problems are constructions that are subject to a constant battle over meaning. Instead of taking these social problems as givens, we should analyse language, concepts and categories that are used to frame the issue in question (Bacchi, 1999).

According to Mouffe (2000), antagonisms, divisions and conflicts are the driving force of a pluralistic democracy. The idea of agonistic adversaries is that agreements can be negotiated through conversation, but conflicting interests and the need for ongoing discussions remain (Mouffe, 2000). Inspired by Mouffe, Saari (2013) introduced a dimension of negotiation to Bacchi's approach that enables the analysis of potential agonistic adversaries, among whom negotiations for change could take place. These agonistic adversaries are regarded as possessing the power to change the existing situation and put the suggested measures into action. To put it simply, agonistic adversaries are central actors that have the possibility of influencing a specific question or problem to be solved, such as nurses' wage increases. Extending Bacchi's analytical framework, which focuses mainly on discourses, by adding agonistic adversaries, brings institutions and actors to the analysis. In the case under analysis, these actors and institutions are the corporatist regime, political parties and politicians, local government sector collective bargaining system, trade unions and employer organization.

The data used in the analysis is comprised of magazines produced by the central actors of the 2007 industrial action: TEHY, SUPER and KT. The magazines were used in analysing the problem representations of unequal pay produced by the central actors. We analysed, using qualitative content analysis, the editorials and chairperson's columns (KT, $N = 22$; TEHY, $N = 109$; SUPER, $N = 66$) between 2006 and 2008, before, during and after the industrial action. These texts served as effective material for retrospective analysis of the 2007 industrial action, as they represent strategic communication targeted to the organizations' members as well as other stakeholders. The topics of editorials and chairperson's columns were various but, especially in 2007, many focused on nurses' wages and developments in wage negotiations; and, later, on TEHY's industrial action.

In the analysis, we utilized the analytical questions developed by Bacchi (1999) and Saari (2013) to tease out the main problem representations of nurses' wages and unequal pay and identify the agonistic adversaries, actors and institutions that are viewed as having power to change the situation. Questions asked of the data are: What is the problem represented to be? What is the cause of the problem and what is the solution? Whose problem is it? Who should do something to solve the problem?

In our analysis, we looked at the wording of arguments about wage increases, as well as the types of rhetoric employed. We looked at how the question of nurses' wages and arguments about increasing or maintaining them were constructed in the texts. In addition, we examined whether gender, class and ethnicity were present in the rhetoric, and whether these were mentioned explicitly or implicitly. We identified the agonistic adversaries as those whom the editorials speak to and direct their demands and wishes to. Finally, we assessed how the collective bargaining system reacted to the attempt to increase nurses' wages.

6 | THE CASE: FINNISH NURSES' INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN 2007

In this section, we provide an overview of the studied case and the events that took place during the 2007 nurses' industrial action. In the overview, we use background interviews of two informants from the registered nurses' trade union, who were central, visible actors in the 2007 industrial action. These background interviews provide valuable insights into the events of the industrial action: objectives of the trade union, lobbying before the parliamentary elections, collective bargaining negotiations, collaboration with the practical nurses' trade union, eventual threat of industrial action, obstacles for gaining wage increases and the aftermath of the industrial action. We also use our own reading of our data and earlier Finnish studies of the 2007 nurses' industrial action (Henttonen et al., 2013; Kunelius, Noppari, & Reunanen, 2010), which focused on media coverage of the industrial action.

The Finnish local government sector is an interesting case for studying how wages are macro-political. The sector is a major employer in Finland, with 435,000 employees in a nation of only five million people. A great majority (80 per cent) of these employees are women. The largest collective agreement – the General Collective Agreement, which covers wages and other work conditions for both practical and registered nurses – is especially female-dominated. The local government sector uses five major collective agreements for different employee groups. Wage levels vary greatly both between and within the collective agreements (in 2015, approximately €6300 for physicians, €3050 for registered nurses, €2600 for practical nurses and €2100 for nurse assistants). Jobs are divided into 'pricing annexes' and 'pricing groups'. To put it simply, there is a price for each type of job, yet the price is not the result of analytical job evaluation but is rather due to a variety of other factors, including gendered valuations, institutional contexts, negotiations and power struggles. Wages in the local government sector carry a lot of historical baggage. Much of the undervalued and underpaid feminized work conducted in the Finnish labour market involves the local government sector.

6.1 | The struggle over nurses' wages

The industrial conflict under analysis in this article took place between employer organization KT and the two trade unions, TEHY and SUPER. Political parties also had an explicit role in this rare event, when undervalued feminized

occupations used rather drastic measures to try to negotiate for better pay. The following events highlight the macro-political nature of wages, as well as the power relations between the central actors and the class relations between the two groups of nurses.

The year 2007 brought historic momentum for nurses as well as opportunities to demand better pay, including parliamentary elections, a new government and its platform, and the renewal of collective agreements. The trade unions' campaign for better wages for nurses acquired full force in 2006. TEHY and SUPER lobbied both in the political party arena and among TEHY's partnership organizations to gain broad support for their demands. The goal was to build up pressure to include pay increases for nurses in the government's platform and to earmark pay increases in collective agreements. The National Coalition Party made a promise in its 2007 election manifesto to aim for a centralized equality incomes policy agreement that would guarantee a pay increase for the skilled and educated, but low-paid, women in the public sector. In addition, a budget of €150 million was allocated for this purpose. The party did not specify, however, to whom the pay increases should be allocated, which was considered problematic for the collective bargaining process.

After the elections, and with negotiations about the new collective agreements imminent, TEHY set the goal of a 24 per cent pay increase over a 2.5-year period. A period of intense negotiations with KT followed, initially together with SUPER, which represented practical nurses. Later, SUPER reached an agreement with KT, while TEHY continued the tough negotiations alone, without support from other unions.

As part of their negotiation strategy, TEHY threatened the mass resignation of nurses should their goals not be reached (Kunelius et al., 2010). At this point, the nurses' industrial action met strong opposition not only from the employers' side but also from other unions, who thought that the question of undervaluation and low wages was relevant to other occupations as well and that nurses were not entitled to higher pay increases than other types of workers. The collective bargaining between KT and TEHY made no progress for several months; then, just days before the mass resignation, a settlement between the parties was reached. Members of TEHY were given a four-year agreement, which differed from other local government sector collective agreements in so far as pay increases were exclusive to members of TEHY.

In addition to the demand for a significant increase in pay, TEHY's other main objective was to obtain their own collective agreement. TEHY tried to follow the physicians' strategy for obtaining more wage bargaining power in the municipal sector: physicians and their union held a five-month strike in 2001 and were ultimately able to acquire a separate collective agreement. Obtaining a higher pay increase than other professional groups is considered impossible in the context of the General Collective Agreement. Hence, a separate collective agreement for nurses had been on the unions' agenda for a long time.

During the course of the collective bargaining process, a united front was shattered. This was because SUPER's practical nurses, with their already low salaries, could not afford industrial action that would be very expensive for the participants. The pay increase demanded – 24 per cent – may have been another reason. TEHY's policy was to promote percentage-based pay increases, whereas SUPER aimed for increases in euros. This represents a class dimension in the two trade unions' strategies, since percentage-based wage increases are more beneficial for registered nurses, while increases in euros are more beneficial for lower-paid practical nurses. After a very complicated implementation and negotiation process, the government's extra funding (€150 million) for equal pay was allocated to all female-dominated professions in the municipal sector, resulting in one of the most expensive negotiation rounds for employers. In addition, export industries negotiated similar levels of wage increases, resulting in very significant increases for the entire Finnish labour market. Since male-dominated occupations and industries received a wage increase as well, this result also undermined one of the goals of the nurses' industrial action – narrowing the gender pay gap. The Finnish corporatist regime reacted by maintaining the gendered division and wage relativities of the labour market.

In 2008, the global economy plunged and Finland was hit hard by the economic crisis. This, of course, was concurrent with the nurses' industrial action and resulting pay increases, which had increased wages in other industries as well. As a result, Finland was stuck having to increase wages at a time of global economic crisis. The

nurses' industrial action has been blamed for the loss of competitiveness of the country's economy ever since. It has become a story of the greedy nurse who wanted too much, shook the entire Finnish industrial relations system and caused major difficulties in the Finnish labour market by threatening the status quo.

7 | RESULTS: THE PROBLEM REPRESENTATIONS OF UNEQUAL PAY

In this section, we focus on the *problem representations*, or ways of framing the problem (Bacchi, 1999), of wages and equal pay produced by the central actors of the 2007 nurses' industrial action. In addition, we identify agonistic adversaries, actors and institutions with the capacity to change the situation, to whom the demands are targeted (Saari, 2013; Mouffe, 2000). According to our analysis, SUPER, TEHY and KT varied in their discourses on wages and their understanding of the essence of the problem in relation to nurses' wages. Next, we will elaborate our research findings on problem representations (Saari, 2013; Bacchi, 1999) of unequal pay produced by the central actors of the 2007 nurses' industrial action. The analysis also highlights how wages are macro-political questions and how wage becomes a critical component in forming hierarchies of social class and occupational group (e.g., Mann, 2007) within the industrial action of the two groups of nurses. Registered nurses build a picture of themselves as the highly qualified white-collar professionals whose wage is not in line with job demands, while practical nurses emphasize the physical demands of their work, the tininess of their salary and a lack of appreciation for the hard work they do. KT a powerful actor in Finnish labour market politics, acts as a gatekeeper for nurses' demands for better wages, denying that there is any inequality and claiming that municipalities simply cannot afford to pay more. In addition, they dislike party politics interfering with labour market politics.

7.1 | TEHY – The union of health and social care professionals

Time to deliver what was promised in electoral campaigns. (TEHY Magazine, June 2007)

The quote above refers to promises made by the National Coalition Party about wage increases before the elections. It also explicitly links nurses' wages to party politics. In TEHY editorials, it can clearly be seen that, in 2006 and 2007, the organization was implementing a strategic plan focusing on three key aspects of unequal pay, which we have called problem representations of (i) *educated nurses in a wage pothole*; (ii) *the lack of nurses in the future*; and (iii) *stronger bargaining power* (for details, see Table 1). In the problem representation of *educated nurses in a wage pothole*, the concern was that nurses' salaries were too small when considering the work demands, education, responsibilities and skills needed in the job, the cause of which was associated with politicians' lack of courage to target nurses with earmarked pay increases.

Emphasizing qualifications and job demands can be interpreted as an expression of registered nurses' identification with white collar, expert occupations with a high level of job demands. They are not claiming that their absolute wage level is low, but that it is low when taking into account the expertise that they have. In the editorials, the long-simmering frustration among nurses was attributed to politicians who were accused of not following through on their promises; instead of political talk, nurses needed higher salaries. Unlike practical nurses, registered nurses clearly linked pay increases to the overall goal of narrowing the gender pay gap in the Finnish labour market. Higher wages for nurses would be in line with the overall gender equality objectives of Finnish society, as expressed in government programmes.

In the second problem representation, *lack of nurses in the future*, we found similar argumentation in both TEHY's and SUPER's editorials (see also Henttonen et al., 2013). One problem of low salaries for nurses is that in the future, it will be difficult to recruit and retain nurses in Finland. TEHY cited Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) comparisons to argue that the relatively cheap and efficient Finnish public healthcare sector depends on lower pay for nurses. Thus, since nurses' salaries are not competitive, there will eventually be a shortage of nurses; they will either choose other professions or work abroad in countries where wages are higher. Once again,

TABLE 1 Problem representations in TEHY editorials, 2006–2008

| Problem representation | Concern | Cause | Measures to be taken | Possible agonistic adversaries |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Educated nurses in a wage pothole | Salary is too small for educated nurses in comparison to the demands of the work, education, responsibilities and skills needed | There is not enough political will to target nurses with earmarked pay increases and correct the discrepancy between the high educational level, demands of the work and wages paid | Nurses need a significant increase in their pay | Politicians, government, employers' organizations, other unions and local employers (municipalities), general public |
| Lack of nurses in the future | Relatively cheap and efficient Finnish public health and social service sector is built on nurses' lower pay in Finland. In the future, it will be very difficult to retain educated and skilled nurses in Finland | Nurses' salaries are not competitive in Finland | Higher pay. Enough talk; it is time to actually do something to increase nurses' wages | Parliament, government, state, employers' organizations, local employers (municipalities) |
| Stronger bargaining power | The current municipal wage bargaining system is an obstacle for lifting nurses' wages to their proper level | The municipal wage bargaining system is too rigid and old-fashioned | Nurses need their own collective agreement and a long-term pay programme for their salaries to increase | Employers' organizations (other unions) |

TEHY's message in the editorials was loud and clear: 'Enough talk, put your money on the table.' The possible agonistic adversaries in this context are many: Parliament, government, state and/or employers' organizations. Each of these actors is responsible for the necessary supply of nurses in the future and/or the level of their wages.

It is a question of money. (TEHY Magazine, July 2007)

The quote above is from an editorial which emphasized the need for a separate collective agreement and pay programme for educated nurses. The third problem representation in TEHY's editorials was *stronger bargaining power*, which clearly acknowledged the significance of the local government collective agreement structure, politics and power relation for wage outcomes. The current municipal wage bargaining system was represented as an obstacle for lifting nurses' wages to their proper level. This is because the system is rigid and does not enable any occupation group to obtain higher wage increases than others. In the editorials, the proposed solution was a separate collective agreement for nurses only, as well as a long-term pay programme to increase nurses' wages. This would mean stronger bargaining power for nurses. For as long as SUPER and TEHY fought for better salaries side-by-side, 'nurses' meant *all* nurses. When the united front was shattered, the focus narrowed to registered nurses. The main agonistic adversary in this situation was KT, which was seen as the major negotiation partner.

TEHY's campaign was carefully and strategically planned by the TEHY leadership. When compared to SUPER's various problem representations, the TEHY strategy was clearly more streamlined. The message was clear: decisions needed to be made in the political arena where the budgetary power rested. TEHY's argument was that nurses deserved better pay and that this could only be achieved by having a stronger bargaining position in the municipal system. If these demands were not met, there would not be enough nurses in the future.

It is bizarre that certain other trade unions are amongst the most vocal in opposing registered nurses' wage increases. (TEHY Magazine, September 2007)

The quote above highlights how the goals of registered nurses met resistance from both KT and other trade unions (see also Henttonen et al., 2013). The Finnish corporatist system and collective bargaining system do not support allocating wage increases to certain groups and not others. This poses a challenge to lifting undervalued female-dominated occupations out of the wage pothole.

7.2 | SUPER – The Finnish Union of Practical Nurses

1587 Euros a month. (SUPER Magazine, August 2007)

The quote above is a headline from an editorial published in SUPER's magazine in 2007. It exemplifies the relative working-poor identity that the practical nurses have when compared to registered nurses with a higher income level. The magazine also featured the story of Berit, a practical nurse and single mother of four children, who was struggling to make ends meet on her tiny salary of €1587 a month. For SUPER, the dominant way to address issues concerning salaries was to frame them as living wages. We have named the most prominent problem representation of unequal pay for SUPER as 'Salary is too small to make ends meet' (for details, see Table 2). The concern in this problem representation is that despite the many responsibilities and physically demanding work done by practical nurses, the salary is too small. The reason behind this discrepancy can be explained as the lack of appreciation for the work done by practical nurses. The skills, education and experience of practical nurses are overlooked, while the tasks allocated to them are seen as too monotonous.

TABLE 2 Problem representations in SUPER editorials, 2006–2008

| Problem representation | Concern | Cause | Measures to be taken | Possible agonistic adversaries |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Salary is too small to make ends meet | Work is heavy and responsibilities are extensive – yet the salary is low | The work conducted by practical nurses is undervalued | Higher pay in health sector jobs, especially for practical nurses | Employers' organizations, state, local employers (municipalities) |
| Future: lack of educated and skilled nurses | Young people do not want to become educated practical nurses | Pay is too small, too many part-time and fixed-term work contracts, working hours too long, job tasks too simple for education and skills of practical nurses | Higher pay, more full-time and permanent work contracts, more personnel; the jobs allocated for practical nurses should be more diverse | Employers' organizations, state, local employers (municipalities) |
| The future of health care and social services is threatened | There is a reduction of public services occurring in Finland | Politicians in the councils of municipalities and the political leaders of the state do not want to invest in securing the availability and quality of public services | Higher pay, better leadership and management, development of education for nurses | Politicians (municipal, parliamentarian, governmental) |
| The current municipal wage bargaining system is an obstacle for decent wages | The current municipal wage bargaining system is an obstacle for lifting nurses out of the wage pothole | The current municipal wage bargaining system does not allow pay increases targeted only to certain professions, namely nurses | Certain professions, namely nurses and especially practical nurses, should be given higher pay rises than others | Employers' organizations, other trade unions in municipalities |

Hard Work Hallelujah! (SUPER Magazine, December 2006)

The editorial with this bold title discusses a demonstration held by practical nurses in 2006, the year before the industrial action took place. Practical nurses were demanding better wages and greater appreciation for their hard work. The editorial also discusses the growing wage gap between practical nurses and registered nurses. In SUPER editorials, the fact that most practical nurses are women is not explicitly linked to the undervaluation of their work. Gender perceptions seem to be less important than the class perspective or the fact that they are paid less. A more explicit dimension of inequality is practical nurses' lower educational level and position in the hierarchy of healthcare organizations when compared to registered nurses. In the Finnish context, debates that educational background and wages are too low to make ends meet can be interpreted as a class perspective.

In SUPER editorials, the measure to be taken to promote equal pay from the practical nurses' perspective is to get higher pay. The possible agonistic adversaries constructed in these texts are TEHY and KT, as well as state and local social and healthcare employers (municipalities). In 2006 and 2007, TEHY was presented as a sister organization and the battle for pay increases was viewed as a common struggle. However, when SUPER accepted KT's proposal for a collective agreement in fall 2007 and TEHY did not, the tables turned. TEHY was increasingly represented as a selfish adversary, not an ally. SUPER justified its detachment from the united front by reasoning that because practical nurses' salaries are so low, they could not tolerate a possibly long-lasting industrial action that would threaten their already tight livelihood.

The array of competing problem representations of unequal pay in SUPER editorials varies from a future without nurses to degradation in the availability and quality of public health services (see Table 2). Clearly, it is not a strong enough argument and political message that practical nurses are struggling with salaries that are too low as well as insecure working conditions and terms. The threat of becoming part of the working poor is not explicitly stated, but it can be read between the lines. It is evident in the editorials that SUPER saw this as a political choice: there is money. It is a choice based on values where that money is used and where it is not used. This argument highlights how wages are macro-political; they are based on political decision-making and resource allocation. If nurses' wages are seen as an important question, money for wage increases can be arranged.

The wisest decision. (SUPER Magazine, October 2007)

When SUPER decided to accept the offer made by KT, it was described in the magazine as 'the wisest decision'. They had negotiated a wage increase and, in addition, a Christmas bonus of €270, both of which the practical nurses would receive almost immediately, just in time for Christmas. The trade union also emphasized that industrial action would have been too expensive for their low-paid members. This rhetoric makes clear that practical nurses cannot afford to be on strike since they would lose their income for that period.

7.3 | Local government employers (KT)

Need for realism in promises made during electoral campaigns. (Kuntatyöntajat, local government employers' magazine, January 2007)

The quote above exemplifies KT's dislike for interference by party politics in collective bargaining and labour market politics. Party politics is typically present in public sector wage determination, although in relatively hidden form. What makes the 2007 case different is the very public electoral campaign promise made by the National Coalition Party, a conservative centre-right political party which would typically be on the employer organizations' side on labour market issues, including wages. This unusual act from the political party is met with resistance and disapproval from the KT.

The KT magazine's editorials (for details, see Table 3) differ from the two trade unions' editorials in the same period, 2006–2008. The argumentation found in the editorials can be characterized as defensive; the employer organization aims to communicate that there really is no problem and that wages in the local government sector

TABLE 3 Local government employers' editorials, 2006–2008

| Problem representation | Concern | Cause | Measures to be taken | Possible agonistic adversaries |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Uncertain future for municipalities, distribution of scarcity | The economic situation in municipalities is very tight and will be even worse in the future | State subsidies paid to municipalities are too small. Municipalities have reached the limit – they cannot deal with new duties or higher salaries | Higher compensation from the state, higher state subsidies | State |
| Collective bargaining structure in municipalities is already too complicated | The collective bargaining system in municipalities is too complicated, with several key bargaining organizations and contracts | The current key bargaining organizations defend their respective interests, which are in contradiction with the common good of a less-fragmented pay system | The current collective bargaining system should be made more uniform. At least, the system should be kept as it is | Unions |
| Wages are equal | There are no differences in pay between the same jobs. The differences in pay are explained by different pricing groups | The pay system in municipalities is built on different key collective bargaining contracts and the pricing groups for different tasks in each of them | There is no problem. Hence, nothing needs to be done | – |
| Stay out of our business | Politicization and public debate on nurses' wages only disturbs the actual collective bargaining process between key bargaining organizations | Parties, government and public debate lack knowledge of the difficult financial situation in municipalities. Also, outsiders do not understand the reality that there are issues that cannot be negotiated on | The collective bargaining process in municipalities should be left alone | Political parties, politicians, media |

are already equal, being based on variations in job demands in different occupations within the sector. When differences in men's and women's wages were found, they were explained by gender segregation within the sector, and that the same jobs do produce similar wage outcomes for men and women; thus, there is no problem to be resolved. We have named this problem representation as *the problem does not exist* problem representation. The interesting issue here is that the local government sector has five main collective agreements, the General Collective Agreement being one of them, within which there are pricing annexes for similar job categories (such as health care); and, within these, there are pricing groups for each job. To put it simply, there is a price for each job but the price does not vary based on gender. The differences can be found *between* different job types, an issue that was at the centre of the nurses' industrial action case.

Municipalities cannot afford extra costs. (Kuntatyöntajat, local government employers' magazine, February 2007)

In addition, problem representations were articulated with respect to the uncertain future of the local government sector and the financial difficulties it experiences, as exemplified by the quote above. The message in this problem representation – *there is no money* – is twofold: the employer organization argued that it simply could not afford to increase nurses' salaries, that there was no budget for it and that it would be too expensive. This argument

highlights the importance of the macroeconomic framework for public sector wage levels, which is directly linked to party politics. The possible agonistic adversary here is the state. The state is in the position to allocate more money to the local government sector if it wishes to do so. In addition, the editorials included expressions of disapproval of actors, such as the politicians and the general public, being involved in what they considered their private territory, that is, the local government sector collective bargaining system. This can be interpreted as protecting their vested interest and acquired power in labour market politics. This problem representation was labelled *stay out of our business*. It comprises the idea that politicization disturbs the negotiation process. The agonistic adversaries here are the politicians, the general public and the media, who should mind their own business and stay out of the collective bargaining process.

Common sense won after all. (Kuntatyöntajat, local government employers' magazine, June 2007)

After TEHY finally accepted the offer made by the employers, KT expressed relief. KT also expressed their hope that everyone would learn their lesson from the historic collective bargaining round and that the collective bargaining process would not be politicized again in the future.

8 | DISCUSSION

This article highlighted the importance of studying wages as gendered macro-political power struggles, and acknowledging the role of social actors, institutions and power relations in shaping wage outcomes. Wages can be viewed as a political arena in which people's identity, culture and politics are negotiated. They are also an arena in which the power relations between central actors of the Finnish corporatist regime are negotiated. As our case exemplifies, wages are a critical component in forming social categories and hierarchies of gender, class and ethnicity (Mann, 2007; see also Figart et al., 2002). This partly explains why the initially united front of the white-collar registered nurses and blue-collar practical nurses was shattered during the collective bargaining and industrial action. As feminized, underpaid public sector employees, registered nurses and practical nurses had shared interests but also class-based differences; for example, different education, hierarchical position and wage levels. These class-based differences become visible in our analysis of how the two groups of nurses argued for the need for wage increases and made claims for equal pay.

As a methodology, we utilized Bacchi's (1999) *What is the problem represented to be?* approach, complemented by Saari's (2013) earlier addition to this framework: agonistic adversaries (see also Mouffe, 2000). While studying problem representations is more about studying language and discourses, identifying agonistic adversaries allows us to study central actors and institutions that have the power to impact wages and wage relativities, which is very appropriate for the purposes of this article. These actors include trade unions, employer organizations and political parties, while institutions include the corporatist regime and collective bargaining system.

To illuminate how wages and equal pay can be studied as macro-political questions, we presented an analysis of the nurses' industrial action in 2007 in Finland, a defining case for the Finnish collective bargaining system. Even today, this case is given as a warning example to any group of public sector employees who express dissatisfaction with their wage levels. We analysed the problem representations of unequal pay that the central actors articulated in relation to their vested interests in the nurses' industrial action. As data, we used editorials and chairperson's columns from magazines produced by the central actors TEHY, SUPER and KT. As these texts represent strategic communication targeted to the organizations' members as well as other stakeholders, they served as illuminating material for retrospective analysis of the 2007 industrial action case. The analysis highlights the differences in the problem representations articulated by these central actors as well the agonistic adversaries they identified.

The two groups of nurses presented gender, class and the main source of monetary undervaluation differently in their problem representations. TEHY emphasized that registered nurses are a group of highly educated professionals doing demanding work, yet they are in a wage pothole. They also identified the undervaluation of work conducted by

women as one of the causes for the low wages. Actors that could change the situation were identified as the Parliament, the Finnish government and local government employers. The practical nurses presented problem representation that emphasized the absolute tininess of their salary. They also presented a working-poor identity in the texts in SUPER's magazine. They discussed the widening pay gap between registered and practical nurses but did not as much identify the female gender of the majority of practical nurses as the most important source of undervaluation and low wages. SUPER identified TEHY, KT and municipalities as agonistic adversaries. KT built defensive problem representations by arguing that there is no problem, wages are already equal and that there is no money to be allocated. However, KT argued that if the government would allocate more resources to municipalities, then wage increases might be possible, thus identifying the government as an agonistic adversary, a possible negotiation partner and an actor with the power to change the situation.

Ultimately, what makes promoting equal pay and changing the current wage relativities challenging is the highly institutionalized Finnish corporatist system and the collective bargaining process of the local government sector, which prevents any group of employees from gaining advantage over others. In a setting like this, wages strongly reflect macro-level labour market politics, party politics and resource allocation, power relations between the different interest groups and their relative bargaining power.

With this article, we have presented the case for studying wages as macro-political. In addition to utilizing quantitative data and analysis for studying wages and equal pay, it is important to study discourses, institutions, structures, actors and power relations. Mainstream approaches to wages as questions of individual choices, investments in human capital or as shaped by market forces need to be paired with a multidisciplinary analysis of gender, politics, power, interests and agency, and their impact on wages, wage relativities and equal pay.

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