

Implementing Equal Pay Policy: Clash Between Gender Equality and Corporatism

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More often than not gender equality policies are good on paper but fall foul of politicized implementation processes. The reasons behind this are becoming a key area of investigation for feminist scholarship on the implementation of gender policies. This article analyzes the barriers to implementing gender equality policies in a corporatist regime. Focusing on the 2007 nurses' industrial action in Finland, the article considers the case of "Nancy the Nurse," which aimed at negotiating higher wages for nurses. Our findings suggest that the corporatist regime effectively prevented the implementation of gender equality policy, thus upholding the status quo and maintaining current wage relativities.

Introduction

This article contributes to an emergent field of studies on the implementation of gender equality policies, by analyzing the barriers to a specific gender equality policy under conditions of corporatism. In the context of an historic equal pay initiative in Finland in 2006–2007, itself derived from an election promise of the National Coalition Party to increase the wages of educated women in the public sector, we consider the case of nurses' industrial action in Finland in 2007. As a policy process, this case was exceptional: The government overrode the social partners in the local government sector, required local authorities to give a pay increase to feminized, demanding jobs in the local government sector, and allocated an extra budget for these pay increases. What also made this case unique was its lasting impact on Finnish society. Coming after the 2007 collective bargaining round, and the nurses' industrial action that eventually resulted in nationwide wage increases, Finland was hit hard by the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath. Since then,

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the nurses have been unfairly blamed for undermining national competitiveness, and used as an admonitory symbol against any group of (feminized) employees in the public sector, who questioned that they were underpaid.

In various national contexts, nurses have attempted to negotiate pay increases and their trade unions have taken industrial action (Briskin 2012; Henttonen et al. 2013; Koff 2016). However, in Finland these struggles have only been rewarded with very modest results. Even today, relatively low pay is still an ongoing challenge for nurses and their unions. This article considers the implementation of a particular gender equality policy. It shows how institutions and gendered power structures militated against the social value and national prestige of the nursing profession to prevent the award of better pay. We analyze the role of the Finnish corporatist regime and show how it maintained the status quo in wage outcomes in the Finnish labor market.

In gender and politics research, questions around the implementation of gender equality policies are becoming a key theme. Gender equality policies often read well on paper, but their translation into meaningful policy can be undone by implementation gaps (Creegan et al. 2003; Engeli and Mazur 2018; Holli and Kantola 2007; Ongaro and Valotti 2008). The implementation gap reflects the lack of interest and motivation to promote gender equality, and the lack of resources and institutional support structures, and is widened by outright resistance to gender policies, as in this case. We draw upon the idea of non-decision-making (Bachrach and Baratz 1962, 1963; Marchbank 1994), the deliberate tactic of limiting the scope of decision-making to relatively noncontroversial issues. The negotiations for, and the implementation of, the salary increases for nurses, from its emergence as an issue onto the political agenda, provide a critical analysis of corporatism through the lens of non-decision-making.

Corporatism in the Nordic context is marked by collaboration and negotiation between employers, employee confederations, and the government to establish economic and social policy, including gender equality policy. The corporatist system has been, and continues to be, the dominant structure of power, and while this appears to reflect a balance of interests, corporatism in practice is highly gendered. Most labor market organizations continue to be male dominated in Europe and this is also the case in Finland (Bergqvist 1991 2004; Koskinen Sandberg 2018), where gender equality tends to occupy a marginalized place on the agendas of the central actors. Despite the central role of corporatism in shaping working conditions, and in the pursuance of gender equality policies and legislation, empirical research into gender and corporatism in Finland has been conspicuous by its absence (Heiskanen and Lavikka 2014; Kainulainen and Saari 2014; Koskinen Sandberg 2016a; Saari 2016). This is especially so for studies on the implementation of gender equality policies in general and equal pay policies in particular.

The political mobilization of nurses for a significant increase in pay and the Finnish government's historic equal pay initiative in 2006–2007 provide the

perfect case to analyze the implementation failure of gender equality policy in the context of corporatism. The article shows how, in the context of corporate political bargaining, this firm political commitment evaporated in the actual implementation process. Our distinctive contribution is the illustration of how corporatism resisted the implementation of gender equality policy, and how this resulted in the disappearance of the gender equality objective. The questions posed are: (i) How did the corporatist system respond to the governmental equal pay initiative? (ii) Were the equal pay initiative and its implementation successful, and were the increases in nurses' pay a reduction in the gender pay gap? (iii) Were there any long-lasting changes in gendered power relations in collective bargaining? It is here that we pay particular attention to issues of gender and class. We argue that this case produced stark class-based distinctions and engendered contentions between different categories of nurses. We focus on the discursive structures that characterized corporatist processes between trade unions and employers' organizations, and ask what happened to the goal of gender equality in the implementation process.

Implementing Gender Equality Policies

The scholarly interest in the implementation of gender equality policies represents a new and exciting direction in gender policy research. It signifies a shift of the analytical focus to the nature and form of the process, which follows the adoption of gender policies: 'implementation, evaluation and impact' (Engeli and Mazur 2018, 112). Scholars working in this field suggest that more knowledge is needed about the barriers that gender policies face in the implementation process—the knowledge of which will unlock their potential to transform gender inequalities. Nevertheless, the importance of these emerging studies is that they begin to shed light on the fate of gender equality policies after they are adopted, by focusing on the negotiations, contestations, and resistance in the implementation phase (Callerstig 2014; Engeli and Mazur 2018, 113). More discursive approaches to implementation seek to trace the forms of passive, as well as active, resistance and the discursive negotiations about framing, which impact how gender policies are (not) put into practice (Kantola and Lombardo 2017).

Engeli and Mazur (2018, 116) draw on previous research in the field of implementation studies to distinguish between four different types of implementation instruments: first, authority instruments (e.g., outlawing discrimination); second, incentive instruments (e.g., providing extra funding for advancing gender equality); third, capacity or learning instruments (e.g., gender training); and finally, symbolic instruments (e.g., information campaign about domestic violence). Embedded in the logic of these instruments is their implementation success—the softer the instrument, the more challenges implementation of the policy potentially entails. Yet, context matters too,

and different instruments may well suit different political systems. The European Union's (EU) soft gender equality policies (e.g., funding and equality programs) have been shown to be more important in Southern European Member States, whilst the EU's hard anti-discrimination laws have greater significance in the Nordic countries (Kantola 2010). Usually, these instruments are mixed and combined with one another when implementing gender policies (Engeli and Mazur 2018).

Finnish gender equality policy has long been characterized as ticking all the right boxes at the policy stage, only to untick them at the implementation stage. A particular characteristic of gender policies in Finland is the drawing up of gender equality action plans and programs without allocating sufficient budgetary resources or personnel for their actual implementation. For instance, in relation to equal pay, the social partners and government officials sat together for years in the tripartite Equal Pay Program working group. They commissioned studies into the gender pay gap, made recommendations and campaigns about equal pay, and yet there have been few tangible results in diminishing the gender pay gap. The failure of the policy has been fundamentally shaped by the softness of the instruments chosen, and the lack of legislative instruments which have rarely been used to advance equal pay in Finland (Koskinen Sandberg 2016a; Saari 2015).

In this context, Engeli and Mazur further argue that when evaluating the final stages of the implementation process and the actual outcomes of policies, the "ultimate goal" of the policy must be gender transformation (Engeli and Mazur 2018, 120). Like "gender equality", gender transformation is a contested concept. Engeli and Mazur (2018, 121–3) propose a distinction between (i) gender-neutral, (ii) gender rowback, (iii) gender accommodation, and (iv) gender transformation in terms of outcomes of gender policy. On this measure, gender-neutral policies must be considered as examples of symbolic and failed policies; a result of a lack of sufficient resources, for example. Gender rowback represents an outright backlash in gender equality policies, explained by an anti-gender equality policy, despite professed benign intentions (Verloo 2018). In gender accommodation, traditional gender roles are entrenched, and social change inhibited, for example, differentials in care allowances that are used mainly by women to care for small children at home. Finally, in gender transformation, gendered and sexualized norms are challenged, changed, and displaced as a result of gender policies. Such gender transformation does not increase inequalities within different groups of women based on race, ethnicity, class, or sexual orientation.

Our study is embedded in the context of this emerging feminist scholarship. Whilst not underplaying the significance of the struggles in framing policy where actors can be very differently placed in terms of their respective resources and capacities, the analytical focus here is centered on processes, actors, and resources during the implementation stage of a specific gender policy. Unlike advocacy and campaigning, then, implementation demands a

different form of approach to negotiation and resistance. Finally, it is evident that the outcome of the gender policy must be the final arbiter of its “success”. Considering the outcome of the gender policy then allows for the question of whether they result in transformations of existing gender inequalities or in the loss of the original goals through the process, leading to increased inequalities increased between, for instance, different groups of women.

We suggest that in analyzing these processes, theoretical notions of legitimacy, power, and non–decision-making are useful. Concepts of legitimacy and power can help to reveal what impact the government’s particular way of presenting the equal pay initiative had on its implementation. In particular, we are interested in how power relations in political debates constructed and legitimated outcomes that were later institutionalized in societies. We argue that gender equality in corporatist procedures is informed by understandings of what is *legitimate*, and how constructions of gender equality and legitimacy involve power relations that contribute to the understanding of the implementation gap in corporatist political arrangements.

We draw upon ideas articulated in previous research that the contested position of gender equality in Finnish policy-making requires a move beyond the dichotomy of legitimate and illegitimate power (Nousiainen et al. 2013). The difficulties of implementing gender equality initiatives, such as the one analyzed here, cannot be understood by simply suggesting that gender equality is legitimate or illegitimate. Instead, gender equality is constantly pushed to the undecided grey zone of unlegitimacy in different policy implementation processes. Gender equality becomes neither legitimate nor illegitimate, despite its enshrined position in national legislation and in the collective agreements (CAs) between labor market organizations (Nousiainen et al. 2013). This theoretical approach gives rise to questions as to which claims for gender equality are legitimate? Or, alternatively, how different discourses use legitimacy in gender equality debates, how does gender equality move outside the sphere of the legitimate (Nousiainen et al. 2013; Saari 2015), and how are these patterns institutionalized in informal practices and norms?

We also utilize the notion of non–decision-making as both a theoretical framework and analytical tool. Non–decision-making is concerned with systemic bias, issue suppression, and the covert use of power. As an analytical tool, it provides pertinent advantages to those wishing to ask critical feminist questions, and analyze situations where there are significant, but latent, power conflicts and actors deliberately limit the scope of decision-making to relatively noncontroversial issues (Bachrach and Baratz 1962, 1963; Bergqvist, Bjarnegård, and Zetterberg 2015; Marchbank 1994). This applies to the description of how gender equality issues can become marginalized with the aim of keeping them off the political agenda. The asymmetrical power relations between the different stakeholders exemplified by the case of “Nancy the Nurse”, not only affect which issues get onto political agendas but also the kind of decisions that are ultimately made. Marchbank (1994, 2000) describes

policy-making as a series of hurdles or barriers; policies can “stumble” at any hurdle, at any point in the policy process. For the purposes of this article, we regard hurdles as “barriers” and scrutinize them in our analysis of policy implementation.

Welfare State Employment and the Undervaluation of Feminized Care Work in a Corporatist System

The welfare state has been central in shaping women’s citizenship and labor market opportunities in the Nordic countries, including Finland (Anttonen 1994; Hirvonen 2014; Hernes 1987; Julkunen 1994, 2009; Korpi 2000; Pfau-Effinger 1993). The welfare state has often been described as women-friendly (Anttonen 1994; Hernes 1987; Julkunen 2009), although its women-friendliness is not uncontested (Borchorst and Siim 2002, 2008; Kantola 2006; Koskinen Sandberg 2018). The claim to women-friendliness hinges upon the welfare state’s role in providing its citizens with services, such as day care, which enables women’s employment. However, the welfare state is a major employer of Nordic women and has relied heavily on the relatively inexpensive labor they provide (Hernes 1987; Koskinen Sandberg 2018; Walby 1990). The feminization of labor, and its attendant partner of low pay, is a feature of the feminized care and educational sector that is widely shared with much welfare state employment. Welfare state employment may be characterized by qualified employees and demanding work, but it is marked by relatively low pay (Koskinen Sandberg, Törnroos, and Kohvakka 2018).

Historically, welfare state employment was a significant route for women to enter the world of paid employment and the economic independence that grants full citizenship (Aaltonen et al. 2016). At the core of this gendered citizenship was also the heteronormative ideal of the nuclear family, and a highly gendered division of labor both within the family and in society more broadly (Julkunen 2009; Laiho and Riikonen 2016). Within Finnish welfare state employment, the nursing profession has a specific history (Haggrén 2005) and occupies a paradoxical place in Finnish society: Nurses have a very high social status (Magnusson 2008), but very low wages. This conflict between regard and reward has been shaped by the development of Finnish welfare state and its strong connection to the public sector (Laiho and Riikonen 2016).

Finland’s nurses were professionalized in the postwar period, an era when nursing was valorized as the ideal representation of womanhood and female citizenship. Nursing itself, however, was not regarded as a profession worthy of appropriate pay and conditions; rather, it was perceived as more of a natural extension to women’s duties within the private sphere. Nurses were idealized, but viewed as a response to a calling; claims for decent wages were consequently viewed as unsuitable (Haggrén 2005). Education and training had a similar ethos and were openly normative, emphasizing Christian values

and the suitability of feminine nurturing and caring qualities (Laiho and Riikonen 2016). Earning a living was seen as an unsuitable motivation to work as a nurse. Instead, the inspiration was expected to be based on the “natural” love of helping the sick, and giving their unswerving loyalty was to medical doctors (mostly men at the time) and patients; nurses’ own needs were secondary. Initially, nursing was also markedly bourgeois; the first Finnish nurses were educated daughters of well-off families (Haggrén 2005).

Nurses’ low wages have been an issue of societal discussion since the 1940s (Haggrén 2005; Henttonen et al. 2013; Koskinen Sandberg and Saari 2019). Despite major social and political shifts, such as the emergence of the labor movement and collective bargaining, the ratification of the International Labour Organization (ILO) equal pay convention (ILO 1951) in the 1960s, the rising level of nurses’ education, and changes in the institutional context, wages have continued to remain relatively low. Like many other countries, Finland used to have different wage levels for men and women. This was reinforced by governmental decision-making in 1945 when the so-called *wage regulation decision* (Bergholm 2005) institutionalized the lower level of women’s wages, and more significantly put downward pressure on the wage levels of feminized work such as nursing. The formal decision to pay women approximately 80 percent of men’s wages for equally demanding work was in effect for more than ten years, until it became illegal (Bergholm 2005). The socially constructed idea that women’s work was worth less than men’s in general also shaped wage levels of feminized work within the Finnish welfare state.

The undervaluing of feminized care work is not a historical detail; it is institutionalized within the contemporary structures of Finnish CAs, and negotiated by actors within the corporatist system. One reason why equal pay policies have been less than successful in diminishing the gender pay gap is intrinsically related to Finnish corporatist labor market structures, which are based on consensual agreements between employers, wage earners, and the Finnish government. The power wielded by trade union confederations and employer organizations has, together with the government, held sway over labor market issues, policy, and legislation (Bergqvist 2004; Koskinen Sandberg 2018; Siaroff 1999; Woldendorp 1997). In Finland, both the trade unions and employer confederations are well organized: Union density is 64.5 percent (women 70 percent and men 59 percent) (Ahtiainen 2015). Most employers are also organized in employers’ federations.

In Finland, the working conditions of employees are determined by a combination of legislation and CAs. 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 incomes policy agreements. The government was one of the negotiating partners in this process, and took part in the agreement by introducing social policy initiatives and taxation levels that were favorable to both wage earners and employers. Some of the tripartite centralized labor market settlements have included equal pay allowances (first

in 1988) for female-dominated sectors and jobs. The overall significance of the equality allowances has, however, been modest. The centralized collective bargaining system effectively maintained the gendered hierarchies of the labor market and the primacy of male-dominated sectors and jobs (Koskinen Sandberg 2018; Martikainen 2000).

Whilst the conflict between capital and labor remains a visible and acceptable axis of negotiations, *gender* remains a conspicuously silenced aspect of corporatism (Saari 2013). This makes for theoretical and methodological challenges. Previous research on Sweden illustrated how women face particular difficulties in gaining access to corporatist negotiation processes, and these challenges have been exacerbated by the transfer of corporatist power to the supranational level of the EU (Bergqvist 1991, 2004; Oldersma 2005). The corporatist regime and its central actors have also been criticized for protecting their vested interests in policy-making, and by virtue of this, protecting male interests at the expense of women (Koskinen Sandberg 2016b; Saari 2015). In this context, the formulation and implementation of gender equality policies have proved extraordinarily difficult.

Feminized Welfare State Employment Today

The local government sector is a significant employer in Finland. It employs 419,000 people in a nation of only five million. The local government sector is, by any measure, feminized; 80 percent of its employees are women. The level of feminization varies across sectors and within its five major CAs. Of the CAs, the General CA, which covers registered and practical nurses, is both the largest and the lowest paying of the local government sector CAs. The other CAs include the Technical CA, the Education CA, the Physicians' CA (feminized, but high paying), and the Hourly Workers' CA. Each of these CAs has their own wage determination practices and different wage levels, even though local government, either in a city or municipality, is considered one employer. Each of the CAs is also negotiated separately.

“Registered” and “practical” nurse are the two most common job titles within the Finnish local government sector. In 2017, there were 42,900 registered nurses and 35,700 practical nurses working for local government. Both occupations are highly feminized, with no less than 90 percent of employees being women (Local Government Employers 2019). In 2017, the average monthly income for a registered nurse was €3,118, of which €2,445 was basic pay, with the remainder the result of working shifts. For a practical nurse, the average monthly income was €2,702 with a basic pay of €2,095 (Local Government Employers 2019). As a comparison, total monthly earnings for an electrical engineer in the local government sector are €3,921. For an elementary school teacher, total monthly earnings are €3,544. In 2017, within the local government sector, the average monthly earnings for men were €3,381 and for women €2,940. In the entire Finnish labor market, men earned

€3,696 on average, whereas women earned €3,101 a month in 2017 ([Official Statistics of Finland 2018](#)). The income level for registered nurses is therefore very typical for women in Finland, whereas income level for practical nurses is below average. Registered nurses have a bachelor's degree, whereas practical nurses receive a three-year vocational education. The two groups of nurses are represented by different trade unions, registered nurses mainly by TEHY—the Union of Health and Social Care Professionals in Finland, and practical nurses by SUPER—the Finnish Union of Practical Nurses. The two trade unions collaborate, and did so in the 2007 industrial action, but despite their occupational similarity they represent divergent class interests ([Koskinen Sandberg and Saari 2019](#)).

The gender pay gap, although apparent within these professions as well, mainly arises in relation to the local government sector as a whole and the Finnish labor market more generally. The main question is not whether men working in these professions are better paid; it is how the undervaluation of the nursing profession, resulting from its specific history, and currently institutionalized within the structures of local government sector CA system, has persisted ([Koskinen Sandberg, Törnroos, and Kohvakka 2018](#)). As the welfare state has faced and met the challenges brought upon it by neoliberalism, austerity, budget cuts, and intensification, the monetary undervaluation of nurses' work has become increasingly difficult to resolve. Pay increases for large employee groups are costly, and thus such claims have met strong resistance. Working conditions within the public sector were already weakened in the 1990s after a severe recession in Finland, and subsequent changing ideas about the role of the welfare state ([Kantola and Kananen 2013](#); [Laiho and Riikonen 2016](#)).

The Case of “Nancy the Nurse”

Finland and other Nordic countries are often regarded as the most gender-equal countries in the world. However, the gender pay gap, a structural feature of the Finnish labor market, still stands at 16 percent ([Official Statistics of Finland 2018](#)). Equal pay is considered one of the main goals to achieve gender equality and has been a central gender equality policy goal for more than fifty years. Despite this, the gender pay gap has remained stubbornly persistent. Nurses' low salaries bear all the hallmarks of a deliberately undervalued feminized public sector occupation ([Koskinen Sandberg, Törnroos, and Kohvakka 2018](#)). Even though nurses' low salaries have been a major issue for their trade unions since 1954, and despite registered nurses having a relatively high educational level (bachelor's degree) and professional respect in society, their salaries in Finland are approximately 20 percent lower than the average in other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.

Into this context, then, came the historic election promise by the Finnish right-wing National Coalition Party to “Nancy the Nurse” (a moniker for the underpaid highly educated female nurse) in 2007 to significantly increase her salary (for other studies, see [Henttonen et al. 2013](#); [Kunelius, Noppari, and Reunanen 2010](#)). After the elections, the nurses’ trade unions held the new prime ministerial party to account for its election promise. This led to an exceptional policy process where the government rode roughshod over their social partners in the local government sector by issuing a diktat instructing them to give a pay increase to feminized, demanding jobs in the local government sector. The implementation of this exceptional policy is our chief concern.

Initially, there were two groups of nurses collaborating in this case: registered nurses and practical nurses represented by their respective trade unions, TEHY and SUPER. The two groups of nurses had obvious shared interests, albeit underpinned by class-based differences. For example, lengthy industrial action would have been financially prohibitive for practical nurses, who have very low incomes. Thus, the practical nurses eventually reached an agreement with Local Government Employers, leaving registered nurses, and their trade union TEHY, to pursue their wage claims with industrial action—our focus is therefore orientated toward the struggle of the registered nurses.

Methodology and Data

The data used in the analysis are the key texts produced by the central actors of the 2007 industrial action: TEHY—the Union of Health and Social Care Professionals ($N=109$), SUPER—the Finnish Union of Practical Nurses ($N=66$), and KT—the Local Government Employers ($N=22$) (hereafter TEHY, SUPER, and KT). In our analysis, we utilize the editorials and chairpersons’ columns and relevant articles in their member magazines between 2006 and 2008, which covers the period before, during, and after the nurses’ industrial action. The public statements given by these key actors concerning equal pay, salaries, and mass resignations in 2007 are included in the data too. We also interviewed two key actors from TEHY to establish a clearer understanding of the industrial action, its formation, and goals. We planned to interview key politicians, especially those from the National Coalition Party, but our requests were ignored. This is highly unusual in the context of Finnish politics, where politicians are easily accessible for research purposes, and a strong indication that the controversial nature of this event can still disturb even after ten years. Our focus therefore falls primarily on those union members the figure “Nancy” came to discursively represent, analysis of interviews with their key actors, and the most relevant texts. We also utilize previous research on this case in our analysis, namely [Henttonen et al. \(2013\)](#), [Kunelius et al. \(2010\)](#), and [Koskinen Sandberg and Saari \(2011\)](#).

Methodologically, we approach these texts through the method of discursive reading. Discourse analysis illustrates how each text offers its own interpretation of the issue. On the one hand, this allows us to trace the dominant discourses and frames that underpinned the statements, and on the other, highlights that which remained unsaid, was not spoken of; the silences and marginal discourses (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009). The question thus becomes how different aspects of the case were, and were not, discursively constructed by different actors and the consequences this had for the implementation of the equal pay initiative. In so doing, we use the barriers recognized in analyses of various stages of the policy process (Marchbank 1994, 2000): objective interest, public agenda, political agenda, decision, and implementation. In doing so, we show how non-decision-making in (i) the political agenda as a first barrier, (ii) decisions as a second, and (iii) implementation as a third. In addition, we analyze the aftermath of this policy process.

Analyzing “Nancy the Nurse” Through Three Policy Barriers

First Barrier: Making “Nancy the Nurse” a Political Phenomenon

The first step to implementing a gender equality policy was to get the issue onto the political agenda, by eliciting broader public support for the objectives, at which TEHY was particularly successful. The failure of the incremental ways to promote equal pay had led to frustration among nurses and pressure within TEHY for stronger forms of action in claiming better wages for nurses (Key trade union actor A and Key trade union actor B). TEHY had campaigned for pay rises for nurses since the summer 2005, but its new action was carefully and strategically planned by the TEHY leadership (Key trade union actor A and Key trade union actor B). Consequently, the low pay of nurses began to enter the political agenda more forcefully in 2006 and 2007. TEHY lobbied political parties and affiliated interests as well as among its partnership organizations to gain a broad base of support for its demands. The idea was to build up a level of political pressure, not just for one-off pay rises to be included in the future government’s platform, but to get higher pay rises earmarked in the CA for the municipal sector (Key trade union actor B). In 2007 then, it was perceived as a moment of historic impetus for nurses: There were parliamentary elections, a new government and its platform, and the CAs demanded by TEHY were to be renewed.

The lobbying of nurses’ unions had indeed been successful. The conservative National Coalition Party made a promise in its election manifesto in 2007 to aim for an equality incomes policy agreement that would guarantee a pay increase from the state budget for highly educated, but low-paid, women in the public sector (Key trade union actor B; see also Henttonen et al. 2013; Koskinen Sandberg and Saari 2019). National Coalition Party MP Sari

Sarkomaa—who was a nurse before becoming a politician—had proposed a model in which the government would declare its aim to allocate an extra subsidy if there was a pay agreement in the municipal sector where educated feminized occupations obtained higher-than-average wage increases (PTK 123/2006 vp., cited in [Finnish Parliament 2006](#); [Kunelius, Noppari, and Reunanen 2010](#)). This proposal was also repeated by party leader Jyrki Katainen in an election panel ([Kunelius, Noppari, and Reunanen 2010](#), 109).

In 2007, the Finnish economy was in a strong position, and trade unions in export industries were able to access higher wage increases than would have been obtained in the centralized frame. In addition, the employers' Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK) refused to make further centralized comprehensive settlements, reflecting a preference for promoting collective bargaining at the level of individual unions and local workplaces instead ([Koskinen Sandberg and Saari 2019](#)). This was also a period when expectations in the public sector and especially for nurses for better pay were strong. In 2007, TEHY's chairperson wrote: "The union round suits us in the TEHY very well" (TEHY 9/2007). At this point, the policy initiative had not stumbled ([Marchbank 1994, 2000](#)); on the contrary, it was regarded as the starting point for the union round, with extra budgets expected for wage increases and stable public and political support for the cause.

Second Barrier: Negotiating Higher Wages for Nurses

In the policy process, negotiating on the content of the policy is one of the potential stages when the tactics of non-decision-making are employed to make the initiative less threatening to the status quo ([Bachrach and Baratz 1962, 196](#); [Marchbank 1994](#)). After the elections, and with the collective bargaining over the new agreements in the municipal sector ahead, TEHY set the goal of a 24-percent pay increase over a 2.5-year period ([Kunelius, Noppari, and Reunanen 2010](#)). The collective bargaining between the employers' union KT and TEHY made no progress between August and November 2007 (TEHY and KT editorials, Fall 2007). KT had argued that the demand for wage increases was far too expensive and the state subsidy was nowhere near to covering the costs. In addition, a typical feature of the local government collective bargaining system was that other public sector unions were hostile toward the idea that the pay rises would be targeted to nurses only (Key trade union actor B; see also [Koskinen Sandberg and Saari 2019](#)). All unions negotiated on behalf of specific employee groups covered by the General CA, and it was arguably inevitable that they would resist wage increases allocated to nurses only. It became clear that to gain wage increases, nurses would have had to elicit the support of other groups. This promised to be notoriously difficult.

As a negotiation tactic, TEHY used an unusually strong maneuver by threatening mass resignation if their demands were not met, a strategy that was perceived as harsh and attracted plenty of criticism (KT 6/2007; see also

Henttonen et al. 2013). Politicians and the Parliament opposed TEHY's demands for a 24-percent pay increase and delivered a sharp criticism of the mass resignation threat. On 15 November, the Parliament voted for an emergency act that would oblige nurses to come to work in cases where patients' health was in danger (MTV 2007), relieving the pressure that the threat put on KT and the government. Three days after the emergency act was approved, and two days before the threatened mass resignation was due, a settlement between TEHY and KT was reached (TEHY and KT editorials from November 2007). Members of TEHY were given an agreement until the end of 2011 (four years), which differed from other CAs in the schedule of pay increases, and a separate TEHY-only protocol which the KT emphasized was not to be considered as a separate CA (KT 6/2007, 1/2008).

Figures and numbers were central in the framing of the political battle. In the media debate, the two significant sums that were bandied around were €500 and €150 million. The debate about the €500 per month, which originated in one of the Finnish tabloids, was whether the National Coalition Party had promised this pay increase to the nurses during the election campaign (Key trade union actor A). The €150 million related to the amount by which the government had agreed orally, but not in writing, to support the increase of public sector women's salaries in the following four years during the negotiations (Kunelius, Noppari, and Reunanen 2010). This figure was insufficient to meet a pay increase of €500, which increased the tensions in the debate. In contrast, TEHY avoided any reference to the €500 claim, and for tactical reasons preferred the negotiations to proceed without revealing the exact figure they were aiming to achieve (Key trade union actor A).

It became evident that, in spite of strong public support for the nurses as respected professionals whose salaries were too low, and public opinion that recognized the electoral promises that they had received, the demand for pay rises specific to nurses only was met with very strong opposition and hostility by the central corporatist actors: Parliament, government, and in particular key labor market organizations (Key trade union actor A, Key trade union actor B; see also Koskinen Sandberg and Saari 2019). Negotiations between TEHY and KT were made extremely difficult by official opposition in public and unofficial obstruction behind the scenes. Here, even though TEHY managed to achieve wage increases, the policy implementation stumbled as a result of covert and overt resistance.

In terms of gender policy implementation studies, this case represents a financial incentive instrument, namely providing extra funding for advancing gender equality (Engeli and Mazur 2018). The final agreement was very complex; in its aftermath, there were competing interpretations of what was achieved (for details, see table 1). TEHY claimed that the agreement ensured a 22–26 percent increase in nurses pay over the next four years. KT said that the settlement meant only a 16-percent pay increase over the four-year period, and certainly, by indicating what is new by an asterisk (*) in table 1, illustrates

Table 1. Pay increases

Date	KVTES 2007–2009	TEHY settlement/agreement
October 1, 2007	General pay increase 3.4%	No increase
December 2007	€270 one-off increase (<i>kertaerä</i>)	€270 one-off increase (<i>kertaerä</i>), if a member of TEHY union November 19, 2007
January 1, 2008	No increase	Gender equality bonus (<i>samapalkkaisuuserä</i>) 2.6% Local sectoral allowance (<i>paikallinen järjestelyerä</i>) 0.5% (amounts to the increases in KVTES March 1, 2008) <i>Liitteen 3 hinnoittelujentukset *new (hoitotyön johto, esimiehet ja vaativat ammattitehtävät)</i>
February 1, 2008	No increase	General pay increase 4% (amounts to the general pay increase in KVTES October 1, 2007)
March 1, 2008	Gender equality bonus 2.6% Local sectoral allowance 0.5%	No increase
September 1, 2008	General pay increase 2.4%	General pay increase 2.4%
May 1, 2009	Gender equality bonus 0.5% (as a local sectoral agreement) Local sectoral agreement 0.3%	Gender equality bonus 0.5% as a general pay increase Local sectoral agreement 0.3%
September 1, 2009	General pay increase 2.4%	General pay increase 2.4%
January 1, 2010	No increase	Gender equality bonus *new 1.3% targeted general pay increase (<i>kohdennettu yleiskorotus</i>) 0.3% local sectoral agreement <i>Liitteen 3 hinnoittelujentukset (hoitotyön johto, esimiehet ja vaativat ammattitehtävät)</i>
September 1, 2010	Not agreed	Local sectoral agreement 0.7% *new to advance productivity
May 1, 2011	Not agreed	Local sectoral agreement 0.7% *new 0–2% depending on development in personnel numbers between October 2006 and October 2010

Source. Adopted from the employers, journal: *Kuntatyönantaja* (June 2007, 9).

*New wage increases.

that the specific increases that TEHY had negotiated would occur during the last two years of the period. TEHY's interpretation was that its own agreement had been reached, and that it would be negotiating over the specificities and the implementation. The interpretation of the employer's organization KT was different. They stated that this was not a separate agreement, but a settlement or a written record (KT 6/2007). In sum, even in cases of incentive instruments being used in gender policy implementation, these contradictory interpretations about what was agreed point toward nascent strong barriers in implementation and in advancing gender equality.

Third Barrier: Implementation of the "€500" at Local Level

Even good policies face challenges of implementation. Non-decision-making and variant other forms of resistance can be mobilized, which can push a legitimate initiative to the grey zone of nonlegitimacy. The first problem for the implementation was embedded in the very phrasing of the statement of intent by the government platform (Government Program 2007–2010). It did not specify which professions and which tasks would be entitled to the increases. Approximately 80 percent of the personnel working in the municipal sector were women, and in most municipal professions some form of qualification and formal education were required. The low salaries of the nurses had long been a bone of contention, but so were the low salaries in education and library work. As Key trade union actor A said:

We tried to negotiate [with the government] that could it steer in a more detailed manner the increases in pay and decide to whom should the increases be targeted at but there was no political readiness to do that. So the money was left to be torn apart in the negotiation tables in the municipal sector.

The second hindrance was the collapse of the negotiating organization, the Toimihenkilöiden Neuvottelujärjestö Tnj r.y (TNJ), of which both TEHY and SUPER were part of, and the disruption that was caused for the structures and processes of local bargaining in the health sector as a consequence. TEHY disengaged itself from the bargaining alliance when SUPER, the practical nurses' union, accepted KT's proposal for a wage settlement (Koskinen Sandberg and Saari 2019). The implementation of the TEHY agreement, or the "additional protocol" for TEHY, as the employers' organization KT wanted to call the wage settlement, was challenging for local-level hospitals and health-care centers. TEHY had 13 regional offices and 300 local branches around Finland. The separate TEHY agreement meant that TEHY had to have its own shop stewards and own negotiation practices at local level. TEHY's shop stewards (local union representatives) negotiated with local employers' representatives about how the local allowances should be divided among the TEHY members

(Key trade union actor B). The tense environment, which was caused by the inflamed atmosphere in which local bargaining took place, was the third reason for the implementation problems. The separate TEHY agreement meant that nurses belonging to different trade unions were paid differently for doing the same job. Pay rises were targeted to TEHY members only (Key trade union actor A).

TEHY and its members attracted hostility from other unions, their members, and employers, and during the threat of mass resignations, the employers exerted a high level of pressure on local TEHY representatives and members. In TEHY's bulletin of October 31, 2007 (TEHY 2, 3), there was an article entitled, "The employer grills [us] because it panics." According to the bulletin, the employers were actively making demands against the mass resignation as a collective, industrial action, and moreover that some employers had demanded personal and written resignations from individual nurses. Some of the nurses working on temporary contracts were asked, presumably because of their precarious employment status, to give an assurance that they would not take part in any forthcoming industrial action. In some cities, employers had opened positions for recruitment that it had found in the mass resignation lists.

In early 2008, TEHY's chairperson wrote in her column:

We have received messages that pay increases that are agreed upon in the [TEHY] agreement have not been paid to members of TEHY yet—either because of the lack of knowhow or will (TEHY 2/2008).

In sum, the equal pay initiative was not welcomed at the local level of wage bargaining, which made effective negotiation that demands trust and openness between negotiators extremely difficult. The task of implementing the wage settlements of 2007 was ultimately made as difficult as possible by the employers.

In the end, the idea that educated nurses should receive higher pay increases than other personnel groups was undermined by decisions made by KT and its local representatives, who expanded the pay increases to all working in the municipal sector. For example, the chairperson of the union for physicians was said to be happily surprised when he heard that the equality allowance was also to be paid to physicians (Key trade union actor A and Key trade union actor B). Physicians, although a feminized occupation, were among the highest paid in the local government sector, and as such, clearly an inappropriate target for wage increases that were designed for those trapped in a black hole of low pay.

The process of drafting the agreement at the local level, as a part of union rounds, can be best described as messy and complex as the implementation. In the union round, the state was not a negotiator, but stood outside of the bipartite process between social partners. Thus, the lack of any political courage

to name the professions that the extra state subsidy should be targeted to, and without the legal and political norms and sanctions required by the implementation of fast track measures, the whole idea of an equal pay measure turned into a game of nudge politics (John, Smith, and Stoker 2009). In the end, the government threw €150 million to trade unions and withdrew from the actual implementation process. The historical equal pay initiative turned into yet another policy failure in the promotion of equal pay and illustrated the complexities of implementing financial incentive instruments as tools in gender equality policies.

The Aftermath: What Was Gained and What Was Lost?

After the public sector wage settlement, the export sector made its CAs in line with the higher pay increase level, significantly raising salaries. The original idea of the CA, in which the pay increases were to be targeted to qualified female-dominated jobs (including nurses) in the public sector, was to lift them from the black hole of low wages and narrow the gender pay gap. This ideal was lost along the road to implementation in the union rounds. The nurses' wages rose, but so did everyone else's, thus the gender pay gap was untouched by the policy measure. We argue that in terms of outcomes of gender policy, the case represents a combination of gender-neutral policy, failed policy, and gender accommodation, where traditional gender roles remained entrenched in the gender pay gap.

This is further illustrated by our question of whether the equal pay initiative resulted in increases in the nurses' pay and a reduction in the gender pay gap. The effects of this historically significant industrial action of female-dominated trade unions were volatile and dependent upon the position taken with regard to the bargaining process. First, there was the nurses' unions aim to gain a significant increase in pay; a success and a failure as some nurses did get a significant increase in pay whilst others did not.

The pay differences between nurses grew (table 2). Since wage increases were in percentage terms, the ones to gain the most were the nurses higher up in the professional hierarchy who already had a better standard of pay. When compared to the index 100 of all wage earners' salaries in 2006, the index was 124.8 in all wage earners' salaries in 2013. Registered nurses' salaries were 27.2 percent higher in 2013 than in 2006, practical nurses' salaries 24.4 percent, and senior nursing officers' salaries 33.7 percent higher (TEHY 2013; see table 2). Practical nurses received almost the same level of pay rise as all other wage earners. Registered nurses got a little bit more than other wage earners, and the highest-ranking nurses received almost 10 percent more than the average wage earner during the period of 2006–2013. Our findings are that the equal pay initiative did not narrow the gender pay gap but, since nursing is a highly feminized occupation, it did result in the magnification of class-based wage differences between women.

Table 2. Nurses' salaries 2006–2013 (wage data obtained from TEHY and Akava—Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland)

Title	Euros												
	Index 2006 (%)	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2013 compared to 2006 (%)	Index 2013 (%)		
Children's nurse	100.0	1,644	1,684	1,798	1,860	1,897	1,924	1,994	2,034	123.7	100.0		
Practical nurse	100.6	1,654	1,710	1,809	1,869	1,905	1,945	2,018	2,057	124.4	101.1		
Dental hygienist	100.5	1,653	1,678	1,821	1,887	1,923	1,958	2,029	2,071	125.3	101.8		
Physiotherapist	114.0	1,874	18,987	2,067	2,139	2,195	2,235	2,326	2,375	126.7	116.8		
Registered nurse	114.9	1,889	1,917	2,086	2,160	2,213	2,265	2,359	2,402	127.2	118.1		
Public health nurse	116.1	1,908	1,964	2,096	2,175	2,223	2,272	2,360	2,411	126.4	118.5		
Midwife	114.8	1,888	1,919	2,091	2,170	2,221	2,277	2,385	2,424	128.4	119.2		
Head nurse in a hospital	141.5	2,326	2,366	2,591	2,695	2,769	2,838	2,978	3,076	132.2	151.2		
Senior nursing officer	184.5	3,033	3,147	3,420	3,575	3,659	3,762	3,933	4,056	133.7	199.4		
TEHY 2013													
Salaries risen from 24 percent to 34 percent													
Total earnings		Index 2006	Index 2013					2006	2014	Index 2006 (%)	Index 2013 (%)		
All wage earners	100	100	124.8					1,654	2,057.0	100.0	100.0		
Highly educated employees	100	100	119.7					1,889	2,402.0	114.2	116.8		

Practical nurses' salaries compared to registered nurses

In addition to seeking a considerable rise in nurses' salaries, TEHY had been pursuing a separate CA with KT for a long time. Both key trade union actors we interviewed said that having their own CA would be the only long-term solution to getting the necessary increases in nurses' pay. Despite the fact that the TEHY agreement was only an appendix to the General CA, with small pay increases, and an implementation that proved difficult, it could have been the beginning of a future separate CA for nurses. Soon after the resignation in 2013 of TEHY's chairperson, who had been the leader of the 2007 industrial action, TEHY renounced the TEHY agreement in favor of the general CA and rejoined the joint bargaining organization TNJ in the municipal sector. For Key trade union actor B, this represented the ultimate failure of the long struggle to get increases in nurses' pay. In the interview, she was tearful as she described her thoughts:

Everything we had gained was lost. It would have not demanded anything more than just persistence to stay separate. I understand that because of our own agreement we were not able to join in all the negotiation tables but still we were able to have a large influence both at the local level and the national level. We were such a big organization. They could have not kicked us out [because us sticking with the TEHY-agreement] even if they had wanted to. Well . . . But this happened. The path on which we had already moved forward – that does not exist anymore.

Third, and not to be underestimated, was the political will in the conservative right-wing government to narrow the pay gap between qualified and educated women in the public sector and their male counterparts in the export sector. However, the attempt to narrow the gap between the public and private sector, and increase especially nurses' salaries, failed because its effects were minor with little longevity. Put simply, there was no gender transformation outcome of the policy initiative.

The figure of "Nancy the Nurse" has made a lasting impact on the public debate. In 2015, Nancy reemerged but in a totally different form. In the current political and economic climate, "Nancy the Nurse" has become a convenient scapegoat for Finland's severe economic recession. This interpretation of Nancy was actively brought up in the media and by right-wing politicians to describe the "unreasonably" high pay increases since the union rounds in 2007. For example, the television channel [MTV \(2015\)](#) asked: "Is it the fault of Nancy the Nurse that the [prime minister] Sipilä's government is sweating painfully?" and *Turun Sanomat* wrote about "The long shadow of Nancy the Nurse" ([Turun Sanomat 2015](#)). Nancy, who began life as the representative of the movement for fair and equal pay, was now being constructed as the root cause of Finland's disappearing competitive edge—the demonized figure of the woman who asked for too much and led the country into peril.

Conclusion

Analyzing this case and trying to find out what kinds of effects the 2007 equal pay mobilization had engendered were made difficult because of the highly charged responses the case elicited. Ten years on, and “Nancy the Nurse” case is arguably an even more multilayered case to study, the complexity of which both surprised and overwhelmed us. Studying the intersection between gender and the corporatist system in Finland has proven to be even more conflict-ridden, power-laden, and prone to contradictory interpretations by different actors than we anticipated.

The case reveals how women in the public sector had a deep feeling of wage injustice and that the Finnish corporatist labor market system offered little hope for effective equal pay measures in female-dominated sectors. It also showed that there was not enough political will among political leadership(s) to crack open the frozen gender-segregated wage structures and raise salaries in feminized occupations of the public sector.

The case of “Nancy the Nurse” has been described as an exceptional situation where the state interfered with wage determination. However, its exceptionality is less than clear cut, and there have been other cases of state intervention. The right-wing conservative government meddled with wages again in 2015 when it facilitated the negotiations of the so-called Competitiveness Pact, which aimed to increase the competitiveness of Finnish economy by lowering labor costs. The Pact hit the public sector especially hard. In addition, the state has for decades given power to both social partners to take part in political decision-making—especially in social politics—and taken power away in wage determination. Therefore, the case of Nancy was not as exceptional as it may seem in the context of the state taking an active role in wage determination processes. What was exceptional was the direct nature of the initiative, and that the party actors, and the government, sought to influence the cemented wage differences between female- and male-dominated professions. The equal pay measure itself was exceptional: the provision of an extra €150 million subsidy.

In 2007, a window of opportunity for an initiative to promote equal pay opened, and nurses’ low wages were brought into the focus of both parliamentary elections and CA settlements. In addition, the financial situation was good, markets were blooming, and the possibilities for a policy success seemed abundant with optimism. However, what was not expected was the lack of political courage to target nurses directly with extra pay rises despite the existence of the additional budgetary flexibility to do so, and the way in which corporatist institutions were able to resist the government’s equal pay initiative. The policy initiative eventually stumbled in the negotiation stage in which tactics of non-decision-making were employed to delegitimize nurses’ wage increases and change the direction of the negotiations.

Above all, the case of “Nancy the Nurse” illustrates the very real difficulties in changing gendered power structures, in this case gendered pay structures under the conditions of Finnish corporatism. The metaphor of a “rubber band” describes this process well, in signifying the elasticity of gendered institutions and how this helps them to resist and manage change. The analysis shows how institutions can be stretched just far enough to aim at reaching better, fairer, more gender equal outcomes, yet still resist until the rubber band returns to its original equilibria, one that serves to illustrate the stability of inequality.

Notes

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