

# Gender equality and the feminized public sector in the affective struggles over the Finnish Competitiveness Pact

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## Abstract

Collective bargaining has been under great pressure in Finland and Europe, including demands for increased wage competitiveness and reductions in public sector spending. This article showcases how relatively gender-equal states with strong corporatist traditions, such as Finland, may align with neoliberal austerity policies that have gendered implications, even when gender equality becomes a prominent issue in a policy debate. This article analyzes the case of the Competitiveness Pact, a recent policy reform to lower labor costs initiated by the Finnish government and negotiated with labor market parties. This analysis combines affect theory and a policy-constructivist approach to analyze the positions and documents produced by the government and labor market parties during the Competitiveness Pact negotiations. We identify problem representations regarding national competitiveness and suggest that the problem representations constructed anticipatory regimes that focused on potential future threats and crises, especially those related to the public sector, which was portrayed as a source of potential crisis and a threat to the masculine export sector. The article shows how neoliberal economic and governmental policies exacerbate gender inequality in the labor market with the consent of trade unions.

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**KEYWORDS**

anticipatory regimes, austerity, collective bargaining, competitiveness, gender equality, public sector

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Collective bargaining has been under great pressure in Europe, as neoliberal policy-making and austerity following the 2008 economic crisis have created a hostile environment for trade unions. Demands for increased competitiveness have been articulated in the form of wage competitiveness and reductions in public sector spending related predominantly to women's employment, making these policies highly gendered (Brown, 2015). Our case study, the Competitiveness Pact, serves as an ideal example of a neoliberal policy with gendered consequences.

This article explores how trade unions negotiate within the corporatist framework under the combined pressures of austerity and neoliberalism, and how they may contribute to the gendered logic of neoliberalism, austerity, and competitiveness, despite actively speaking against gendered economic cuts. This analysis focuses on the dynamics of the Finnish corporatist system and the role of gender equality in policy debates during an economic crisis. This makes for an interesting case study, as both trade unions and gender equality have been considered institutionally rather strong in Finland. Yet, the negotiation process created a result that is clearly negative for gender equality. This article explores the dynamics of Finnish corporatism to explain why this happened.

This present analysis combines a policy-constructivist approach (Bacchi, 1999) and affects theory (see e.g., Adams et al., 2009; Massumi, 2010). Through a policy-constructivist approach, we identified problem representations that corporatist actors constructed regarding national competitiveness. We propose that these problem representations were not only focused on constructing present-day problems but rather on anticipating, constructing, and reacting to a variety of possible problems in Finland's future. To analyze this aspect of these problem representations, we utilize the concept of the anticipatory regime established by Adams et al. (2009). Anticipatory regimes are ways of governing through constructing uncertain framings of the future and establishing ways to respond to uncertainty but also using this uncertainty to legitimize and privilege some policy choices over others. The gendered nature of anticipatory regimes is what interests us the most.

The case we study is the Competitiveness Pact, a tripartite Finnish labor market policy reform aimed at increasing competitiveness and lowering labor cost. These goals were accompanied by the threat of further public sector cuts if the labor market parties did not accept the Pact's conditions. In our analysis, we identify an anticipatory regime of crisis through which (1) neoliberal policies that are detrimental to gender equality were legitimized and organized and (2) public sector spending and its future were constructed as being embedded in uncertainty and positioned as a threat to improving national competitiveness.

Although trade unions, opposition parties, and many academics opposed the gendered impacts of the Competitiveness Pact (see e.g., Kylä-Laaso & Koskinen Sandberg, 2020; Vuorelma, 2017), the issue of gender equality was ultimately overshadowed and sacrificed for the sake of consensus. The feminized public sector paid the highest price for increased competitiveness in the private sector. While an agreement was reached and the Pact was implemented, it remains a source of the ongoing conflict in the Finnish labor market. It was again a central point of conflict during the 2019–2020 round of collective bargaining in terms of whether certain policy measures were meant to result in temporary or permanent changes in work conditions.

This article addresses the following research questions:

RQ1) What kinds of problem representations related to competitiveness measures, their gendered aspects, and corporatism do corporatist actors (particularly trade union confederations) construct?

RQ2) What kind of gendered anticipatory regime is constructed through problem representations?

The data used relate to the respective positions of the labor market parties and the government in relation to the Competitiveness Pact, as expressed in press releases, news items, statements, and blogs ( $N = 383$ ) published between 2015 and 2017. As these relate to the strategic communications of the central actors, targeting both the wider public and each other, the data provide important insights into the gendered logic of the problem representations that corporatist actors create. The data also make it possible to consider how corporatist actors frame the future and construct its possibilities and constraints.

This analysis of a unique empirical case contributes to the literature on corporatism and gendered austerity by showing how neoliberal economic and governmental policies exacerbate gender inequalities in the labor market with the *consent of trade unions*, while the feminized public sector is positioned as a threat to national competitiveness. We make a methodological contribution by combining Bacchi's (1999) policy-constructivist approach with the concept of anticipatory regimes created by Adams et al. (2009) to analyze our data. Together, these ideas allow for further exploration of how the problem representations are used to frame the future and impact which policies are prioritized and how the problem representations involve an affective aspect, despite often appearing neutral and fact-oriented. Finally, we elaborate on these concepts in the context of crises, coining the concept of an anticipatory regime of crisis.

## 2 | GENDERED DYNAMICS OF CORPORATISM, COMPETITIVENESS, AND THE TURN TO NEOLIBERALISM

Finland is one of the Nordic welfare states that is renowned for its commitment to gender equality. The common understanding is that welfare state policies, collective bargaining, and social pacts have played a crucial role in promoting gender equality and improving the position of women in politics, the labor market, and family life. Given Finland's reputation as a model country for gender equality and the assumed role of trade unions in advancing equality, one might expect trade unions to take a strong position in advancing gender equality in tripartite processes, such as in the Competitiveness Pact's negotiations. This section of the article aims to shed light on why this is not always the case and what kinds of ideologies and power dynamics impact the role of corporatist actors and their possibilities of influencing policy processes and policy outcomes.

In Finland, several gender equality issues remain unresolved, including the relatively wide gender pay gap, the gender-segregated labor market, and the uneven distribution of care (see e.g., Grönlund et al., 2017; Koskinen Sandberg, 2018). While the expansion of the welfare state has provided more services that support women's participation in the labor force and employment opportunities in public services, their wages remain low and their work is undervalued (e.g., Koskinen Sandberg et al., 2018). Structural wage inequality persists between the female-dominated public sector and the male-dominated private sector.

Inequalities in the labor market are partially upheld by the gendered dynamics of the Finnish corporatist system. Within Finnish corporatism, blue-collar, male-dominated trade unions have traditionally been the most powerful. Among employer organizations, corresponding employer organizations that represent the technology and export industries are the most powerful. Female-dominated fields tend to have less power, which impacts the relative importance of women's interests and equality within Finnish corporatism. This is intensified by the recent emphasis on the competitiveness of the export industries, giving these industries primacy in collective bargaining and wage development in Finland. Especially during times of economic hardship, the female-dominated public sector tends to be a second priority and is often seen as a burden: an expense to be cut.

Finland has typically emphasized collaborative decision-making and policy formulation around labor market issues, social policy, taxes, and gender equality policy (Kiander et al., 2011; Rommetvedt, 2017). Collective bargaining has traditionally been centralized, although the current trend is toward decentralization. In recent years, Finland has followed the example of other Nordic countries, such as Sweden and Denmark, where collective bargaining is based on "pace setting" by the export industries. In principle, collective bargaining takes place at the

industry level, and each sector negotiates its collective agreements. In practice, the widely accepted (although contested) view is that public sector wage increases should not exceed those negotiated by the export industry (see e.g., Jonker-Hoffrén, 2019). In this way, the Finnish system of collective bargaining preserves the wage gap between the male-dominated private sector and the female-dominated public sector (see e.g., Koskinen Sandberg, 2018). There are also contrary voices; for example, during wage negotiations in 2007 and again in 2020, trade unions representing nurses demanded higher wage increases to address the pay gap (see, e.g., Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019; Saari et al., in press). These demands further intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the healthcare sector was heavily burdened by the pandemic.

While historically collective bargaining may have strengthened women's position in the labor market, trade unions and labor market organizations remain highly gendered, masculine institutions, and "women's interests" are often perceived as separate or even contrary (see e.g., Dickens, 2000; Pillinger & Wintour, 2019). This is also the case in Finland, where gender equality is rarely a feature of the collective bargaining agenda; when it is, advances tend to be minor and symbolic. Preserving the corporatist system is considered more important than tackling issues such as the pay gap (Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019).

Currently, as a result of decentralization and the Confederation of Finnish Industries withdrawing from centralized collective bargaining (Jonker-Hoffrén, 2019), trade union confederations are also experiencing turbulence, and they are afraid of losing their power position in Finnish society. The role of social partners is also changing within routine corporatism, as the state has taken a stronger role in policy formulation (e.g., Kylä-Laaso & Koskinen Sandberg, 2020; Saari et al., in press), which is weakening the relative power position of the labor market organizations. This creates an incentive to hold on to corporatist traditions at almost any cost, including giving in to gender equality objectives when this serves the purpose of maintaining the corporatist system.

## 2.1 | Economic crises, gender equality, and competitiveness policies

The transformations of Finnish corporatism and industrial relations, and their potentially adverse gender effects, have been further exacerbated by two severe economic crises in recent decades: the national banking crisis during the 1990s and the global financial crisis of 2008. These crises changed both the welfare state and power relations within the corporatist system, as greater emphasis was placed on restoring national competitiveness (Wuokko, 2019) and market efficiency. National competitiveness as a central policy goal acquired hegemonic status in Finland, sidelining the welfare state and its traditional principles of redistribution of wealth and universal access to public services. Despite Finns' continuing support for the welfare state's institutions, these have been modified to promote competitiveness (Kantola & Kananen, 2013).

Much attention has been paid to the gendered nature of a crisis, as policy responses have typically been highly gendered (Griffin, 2015). It has been argued that the crisis of 2008 has caused a change in the accessibility and production of services and resources related to reproduction, as the role of the state has become more limited (Pearson & Elson, 2015). In Finland, both recent crises involved this type of shift, as the role, size, and organization of the public sector have come under scrutiny.

The main factors identified as being the reason for the crisis in 2008 are changes in the export sector, recent wage increases, and increasing public debt. Information communications technology company, Nokia—the flagship of Finnish industry—was ailing, and sanctions against Russia weakened Finnish exports. Also, relatively high wage increases were negotiated in the 2007 collective bargaining round, when trade unions representing nurses demanded and eventually secured pay rises to bridge Finland's gender pay gap (e.g., Saari et al., in press). With other sectors demanding similar wage increases, labor costs rose across the Finnish economy just before the 2008 crisis. The nurses were blamed both for the increases in public sector expenditure and for Finland's loss of wage competitiveness. Several years later, the Competitiveness Pact was intended to restore the alleged loss of national competitiveness.

## 2.2 | Neoclassical economic theory, neoliberalism, and austerity policies as a necessity

The economic crisis of 2008 intensified the commitment to austerity, competitiveness, and neoliberalism in Finland and across Europe (see e.g., Ojala & Harjuniemi, 2016; Walby, 2015). Austerity policies meant cuts directed at the feminized public sector and were detrimental to gender equality (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Karamessini & Rubery, 2014). In the labor markets, hostility toward trade unions has increased, and in several cases, they have been bypassed by governments (Bieling & Lux, 2014).

Neoliberalism relies on neoclassical economic theory, which has become a dominant orthodoxy and is often viewed as the only legitimate way to think about the economy (see e.g., Griffin, 2015; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009). Neoclassical economic theory encourages governments to take measures such as reducing income tax levels, reducing the generosity and coverage of social security benefits, promoting wage setting at the individual level, relaxing employment protection legislation, and implementing sanctions to increase labor supply. The ideas of neoclassical economics, as well as representatives of the economics profession, are highly influential in Finnish society, in policy debate, and in public discussion (see e.g., Eskelinen & Jonker-Hoffrén, 2017); this further strengthens the legitimacy of these neoliberal policies, as they are viewed as the only reasonable way to address the economy, especially during times of economic hardship.

Many austerity policies follow *ordoliberal rationality*, which, in its objectives, is closely linked to neoliberalism and neoclassical economics. In ordoliberalism, power ultimately belongs to the state, and the state is in charge of taking care of the economy and protecting it from interfering influences, such as social or political strife (Bonefeld, 2012; Ojala & Harjuniemi, 2016). The Competitiveness Pact marked an attempt toward shifting the power in the corporatist system from the labor market parties toward the state, although the state, or center-right government, clearly aligned itself with the employers' associations, as they had similar interests.

To summarize the key takeaways of this section, it is possible to see that, in previous decades, the rationale and rhetoric of national competitiveness have been strong in Finland, and it has also become heavily institutionalized in the corporatist system. Embedded in neoclassical economic thinking and a shift toward more neoliberal or ordoliberal policy-making, business interests have simultaneously gained a stronger position in corporatist politics. Gender equality, on the other hand, is often dismissed or ignored in economic discourse, while the feminized public sector has become under scrutiny.

## 3 | THE CASE: THE COMPETITIVENESS PACT

In 2015, Finland swung to the political right; the conservative Centre Party won the parliamentary elections and formed a new government with the right-wing National Coalition Party and the populist Finns Party. Although Finland had already adopted austerity measures and the previous government had raised awareness of the crisis, debate in the Finnish media and public discourse around austerity measures peaked just before the parliamentary elections (see e.g., Adkins et al., 2019).

The necessity for some type of competitiveness measure was accepted and promoted by hegemonic institutions and actors, including the media. Research shows that, ever since the crisis began, the media was unwilling to introduce alternative viewpoints into the discussion and mostly gave space to established ideas and institutions, such as the Ministry of Finance, the EU, and the elites who coalesced around these ideas (Harjuniemi & Ampuja, 2019). Research on the Pact shows that the corporatist actors agreed on the need to improve competitiveness, but the trade unions still needed to justify this to their constituencies (Reunanen & Kunelius, 2019). The introduction of explicitly neoliberal measures to labor markets and the state's exceptionally active role, however, were much more contested. Nonetheless, all the major political parties accepted the view that austerity was necessary to survive the crisis (Elomäki, 2019).

The Competitiveness Pact sought to increase the Finnish economy's competitiveness by reducing labor costs by 5% (Prime Minister's Office, 2015). Competitiveness Pact negotiations between the government and the labor market parties were long and difficult and failed several times. In light of this stalemate, the government began to develop alternative competitiveness legislation to enforce its goals. This aggravated the trade unions, as the legislation would have prevented labor market parties from negotiating some elements normally agreed upon collectively (Kylä-Laaso & Koskinen Sandberg, 2020).

Agreement on the Competitiveness Pact was reached in the spring of 2016. The proposed measures involved cuts to certain elements of pay, including a 30% cut for 3 years in public sector employees' annual holiday pay (about half a month's salary), shifting 1.2% of social insurance contributions from the employer to the employee, shifting social security payments from the employer to the state to varying degrees, and adding 24 additional unpaid working hours annually (Competitiveness Pact, 2016).

The Pact impacted the feminized public sector more harshly. Wages stagnated in the already low-paid local government sector, and the 30% cut in holiday pay further impacted annual earnings (Statistics Finland, 2018). The statistics also show that the Pact increased women's working time more than men's requirement. While those employed in female-dominated public sector areas, such as education and health care, had to work an average of 30 min longer each week, male-dominated export industries experienced no such increase (Statistics Finland, 2019).

## 4 | DATA AND METHODS

The data include 383 documents (e.g., position papers, news, blogs, and press releases) on topics directly related to the Competitiveness Pact and produced and published by central actors in the 2015–2017 negotiations. Those actors were the Finnish government, the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK), the Finnish Confederation of Salaried Employees (STTK), the Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland (Akava), the Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK), and the Local Government Employers (KT) (see Table 1). All data were freely available on the actors' websites. The most active publishing periods were 2015 and 2016; some of the collected materials were published in 2017, following the implementation of the Pact. These data are of interest because they represent the strategic communications of key actors who were targeting each other and the wider public.

These data allow for analyzing the gendered logic of the corporatist actors and also make for an interesting case for analyzing the role of affects and the anticipation of problem representations, which are often constructed as neutral and merely factual. Previous research has shown that it was important for the government to appeal to citizens' emotions and establish correct ways of feeling about their policies (Autto & Törrönen, 2018); arguably, this also applies to the other corporatist actors.

Trade union confederations are central organizations that represent individual unions. Within these confederations, there are both female- and male-dominated trade unions, but our focus is on the confederations themselves. The confederations, therefore, represent different class positions and must balance the interests of the male-dominated export industry sector with those of the more feminized public sector. This works similarly on the employer side. The three trade union confederations representing employees with different educational backgrounds are vocational (e.g., SAK), tertiary (e.g., STTK), and higher university education (e.g., Akava). Among the key actors (see Table 1), the EK, representing the collective interests of businesses, is a potent force in Finnish corporatism. KT represents local authority employers.

The methodology combines a policy-constructivist approach (Bacchi, 1999) with theorisations of affects and anticipation (Adams et al., 2009). The analysis involved two phases: the first of these was informed by Bacchi's (1999) "What is the problem represented to be?" (WPR) framework, which proposes that every policy proposal entails an explicit or implicit diagnosis of the problem to be addressed and seeks to identify the problem representations that characterize any discussion of social problems. Bacchi characterized the WPR approach as a form of critical analysis that addresses the premises, production, and effects of problem representations (Bacchi, 2009). In

TABLE 1 Participants of the competitiveness pact negotiations

Organization	Sectors represented (examples)	Education level	Female members	Quantity of published documents (2015–2017)
Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK)	Industry, public sector, service sector, health care	Vocational education	46%	158
Finnish Confederation of Salaried Employees (STTK)	Industry, service sector, public sector, health care	Tertiary education	75%	55
Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland (Akava)	University-educated employees (e.g., teachers, physicians, lawyers and engineers)	Higher education	50%	48
Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK)	Business organizations	n/a	Male-dominated private sector <sup>a</sup>	53
Local Government Employers (KT)	Local government	n/a	Feminized public sector	39
Finnish Government	n/a	n/a	n/a	30

<sup>a</sup>EK is an employers' confederation and the KT is an employer organization, which means that they do not have individuals as members but rather companies and local authorities. Thus, providing data on employees' gender distribution is not possible. Employees are members of their respective trade union, which is a member of SAK, STTK, or Akava.

the present context, these are used to legitimize arguments regarding competitiveness, corporatism, and the public sector as key issues in the ongoing debate.

Bacchi (2009) also highlighted the centrality of feelings in the construction of problem representations, as they are important in establishing the importance of political interventions. Hence the second stage of the analysis draws on the theorization of anticipatory regimes (Adams et al., 2009) and affects (Massumi, 2010). In understanding power and domination, the role of affects is central, as they connect ideas, values, and social structures (Ahmed, 2004). Crisis, however, makes temporality an important question, as it allows the history and expectations regarding the future to be restructured (Knight & Stewart, 2016; Walby, 2015). Research on austerity shows that austerity policies and the discourse on austerity impact how both the past and the future are framed, and that affects play an important role in these imaginaries. The main orientation toward the future is that of survival—finding ways to keep ongoing (Coleman, 2016). In the context of austerity, this kind of survival is often politically presented in the form of “shared sacrifices” that are made to benefit competitiveness and economic growth (Brown, 2015).

Although the Competitiveness Pact's negotiations were strongly framed in the existing economic crisis, we recognized that the problem representations were also about anticipating a possible future that is threatening. For analyzing this aspect of the problem representations, we utilize Adams et al.'s (2009) theories on *anticipatory regimes*. Anticipatory regimes are forms of governance that focus on constructing framings of uncertain futures and ways of anticipating and preparing for them. Anticipatory regimes construct an affective orientation toward the

future, which organizes how the present is understood. These regimes authorize political intervention that privileges some problems and diminishes others; this is while eliciting affects ranging from fear to hope to bind subjects to the regime.

For our analysis, we conceptualize an *anticipatory regime of crisis* in which the framing of potential futures is embedded in the discourse of crisis. The discourse of crisis is further used to emphasize the urgency of focusing on some issues while ignoring others, as responding to problems considered secondary may, in fact, even exacerbate the crisis by causing delays. Problem representations of more immediate problems, such as gendered wage inequalities, are positioned as secondary to resolving potential and anticipated crises.

The concept of threat (Massumi, 2010) can be used to develop the concept of anticipatory regimes in the context of crisis. Threats are like anticipation in that they structure our understanding of the future, as they establish futures that are embedded within risks and dangers. Fear or worry becomes central affective states that need to be reconciled by some type of response to the threat. Massumi (2010) and Adams et al. (2009) argued that uncertainty is never entirely resolved, as this is the basis of threats and anticipatory regimes. We argue, then, that threats can be understood as important factors in the anticipatory regime of crisis.

The first stage of our analysis examined the published positions of key actors in the Competitiveness Pact's negotiations in terms of their different framings of relevant social problems (e.g., national competitiveness) and the solutions they proposed. The results of this first stage of analysis are presented in Table 2. The problem representations (see Table 2) highlight rising public debt's key threats to competitiveness, corporatist traditions and the feminized welfare state. To varying degrees, these were also key points of conflict.

The second stage of this analysis examined the problem representations and assumptions about competitiveness, gender equality, and the public sector that underpinned the above arguments. As Table 2 indicates, all problem representations are related to the declared goal of the government and employers to increase competitiveness. In this regard, the trade union confederations remained largely reactive and defensive. They did, however, broadly agree that the public sector needed some balancing and that national competitiveness was an issue.

## 5 | RESULTS: THE PUBLIC SECTOR AND THE ANTICIPATORY REGIME OF A CRISIS

When analyzing the problem representations shown in Table 2, three were identified as being central. These were used to both construct and legitimate an anticipatory regime of crisis through which the future of Finland was considered as being uncertain and threatening through (1) failing cost competitiveness, (2) stagnating corporatism, and (3) increasing public debt. Both the government and employer organizations insisted that austerity measures and cuts were necessary to restore lost national competitiveness and that tripartite negotiations might make achieving this goal difficult. The trade union confederations argued strongly that competitiveness should not be achieved by undermining working conditions and that lowering labor costs was not a way to maintain Finland's competitive edge in global markets. Also, trade union confederations expressed their deep concerns about the future of traditional collective bargaining and the gendered impacts of the Competitiveness Pact.

Competitiveness and public debt were closely linked to the central threat of economic failure, which would weaken or collapse the welfare state. Feminized public sector spending was constructed as a problem and a threat to private sector competitiveness. Additionally, the stagnation of corporatism and the resistance of trade unions were also seen as threatening Finland's ability to make crucial decisions.

These problem representations work on a spectrum between uncertainty and inevitability. Extreme economic failure, unless competitiveness was improved and public spending reduced, was presented as relatively inevitable by the government and the employers. This type of speculation about the future creates strong affective and moral bonds by establishing a need to protect the future and have control over it (Adams et al., 2009). As all corporatist actors accepted the need to improve competitiveness, disagreements mostly existed regarding the optimal responses and severity of the threats involved in the situation.

TABLE 2 Participant's problem representations

Actor	Problem representation	Concern	Cause	Proposed measures
Finnish Government	The Finnish economy is in a poor state.	The Finnish economy has lost its competitiveness, and debt is growing.	Large and expensive public sector; decrease in productivity.	Enhance productivity by increasing working hours without wage increases, cutting labor costs by 5%.
Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK)	Finnish businesses cannot thrive in the current circumstances. Public debt harms the private sector.	Finnish businesses have lost their competitiveness, and this must be restored. The relationship between public sector spending and competitiveness is worsening.	The public sector is "bottomless," unhealthy, too large, and expensive. Tripartite negotiations are too rigid and slow.	The government must take command of increasing private sector competitiveness and cutting public sector expenditure. Trade unions need to act responsibly.
Local Government Employers (KT)	Reforms must treat the different sectors fairly. The public sector economy must be improved via increased competitiveness.	Competitiveness, productivity and employment rates must be improved to secure local government finances. Cutting expenses poses risks for the local government sector.	The poor state of the Finnish economy; growing unemployment rate; decreasing productivity; and competitiveness.	There is a need for structural reforms (e.g., in relation to working hours). Any reforms must be designed to treat the private sector and public sector workers equally.
Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK)	Competitiveness cannot be built by weakening workers' conditions. Public debt is not terrible, but improvements are needed.	While increased competitiveness is essential, this must not be achieved by weakening the working conditions of low-paid employees. The proposed measures impact low-paid women especially hard.	The government's proposals threaten fundamental rights such as the right to collective bargaining, as well as Finland's well-established employment relations system.	Active resistance, demonstrations; proper tripartite negotiation of the Competitiveness Pact's content. Competitiveness improved by establishing the "Finland model," in which the export sector sets the pace of wage increases.
Confederation of Salaried Employees (STTK)	Employees' situation should not be weakened for the sake of short-term savings. Public services require some reforms.	Finnish competitiveness is based on high quality and uniqueness; labor unit costs are less central. The proposed policies treat women unfairly.	The government is prioritizing lower labor costs at the expense of education, skills and a lower threshold for entry to employment.	Parties must work together to negotiate measures. Moderate wage increases are one possible solution.

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Actor	Problem representation	Concern	Cause	Proposed measures
Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland (Akava)	Finland's success in global markets should not be based on low costs. Public debt needs balancing.	Insufficient emphasis is placed on education, skills development and well-being. The proposed changes are unfair to women.	The government should not interfere in labor market issues or collective bargaining.	Rather than cutting labor costs, emphasis should be placed on investment in education and innovation, which create value.

## 5.1 | Balancing the public economy: A practical necessity and a moral imperative

In the early stages of the Pact's negotiations, gender was mostly ignored in the problem representations, although the impact of public sector spending on competitiveness played an important role. Instead, balancing the public economy became a practical necessity and a moral imperative. This is a central aspect of anticipatory regimes, which are moral and may often place optimization of the future as a moral responsibility for citizens (Adams et al., 2009). The problem representation established balancing the public sector as being the responsible thing to do for the benefit of collective national interest. In practice, this moral responsibility is evoked through establishing a variety of risks and threats that cannot be ignored.

First, the legitimacy of and necessity for the Pact were affirmed primarily by emphasizing the miserable state of the Finnish economy as the basis for the central threat of imminent and catastrophic economic failure. The newly formed government, while cutting public sector costs, set a neoliberal agenda that sought to increase Finland's wage competitiveness. The government insisted that a Keynesian debt-financed stimulus was not an option: "If the stimulus really helped, Finland's economy should be in an exceptional state" (Government 2.6.2015).

The government, employer organizations, and even trade unions agreed, to some extent, that reforms were needed to pull Finland back from the brink of economic collapse. Employer organizations quickly aligned with the government's goals regarding wage competitiveness and public spending, and these two themes were articulated together strongly. EK challenged the trade union's arguments regarding productivity, insisting that it would not be possible to improve productivity if nothing were done to public spending:

Finland cannot succeed in international competition if employers' and workers' competitiveness and incentives are poured into the bottomless wallet of the public sector (EK, 23.4.2015).

EK (20.5.2015) even argued that the "National economy is approaching a situation after which outsiders will begin to dictate our pace of adjustment." KT had a similar view, assessing that the Pact was "a requirement for reducing the sustainability gap of the public sector" (KT 20.8.2015). These problem representations establish public sector spending as being not only inefficient, impractical, and morally suspicious but also as a drain on the private sector and even national autonomy.

The trade union confederations (Akava, STTK, and SAK) initially agreed to increase national competitiveness and accepted the overall rationale regarding the weak economic situation. They also saw the need to reform the organization of public services and balance public sector spending so that public debt would not increase (Akava, 22.4.2015; SAK, 26.3.2015; STTK, 29.4.2015). Akava, for example, presented the following commentary: "The most important goals of the upcoming government have to be balancing the public economy and economic growth" (Akava, 22.4.2015). Although balancing the public sector can be achieved in many ways, as a rhetorical tool, it is

strongly associated with cuts to public spending. The trades union confederations, like the employers, did not consider public spending from a gendered perspective.

While a loose consensus existed regarding the economic situation, the problem representations diverged in terms of the solutions being proposed. In the Pact's original proposal, the government suggested a 5% increase in working hours without a similar increase in wages to improve wage competitiveness. The trade union confederations disagreed that labor costs were the main issue, stressing that the burden of the Pact's negative effects should not be borne by wage earners alone.

The solutions also diverged on how the corporatist actors should proceed and how well the corporatist system was functioning. The government threatened to use legislative means to achieve its goals if the labor market parties refused to accept the government's proposals. In response, SAK stated that it would be difficult to reach an agreement, as "the government has unilaterally determined the objectives and content" (SAK, 3.6.2015), linking budget cuts to the Pact (27.5.2015). STTK asserted that "wage earners will not negotiate on the Societal Pact as silent partners" (17.6.2015). EK (20.5.2015), however, insisted that the government must hold on to its power rather than surrendering it to other parties in the tripartite system, arguing that "tripartite preparation without determined leadership has proven to be too slow and rigid." The government's demands and competitiveness legislation sparked conflict between corporatist actors.

The levels of wages and public sector spending were constructed as sources of crisis that required strong measures. The crisis was discussed with emotionally loaded and moralistic discourse, emphasizing threats to the Finnish economy, competitiveness, and the private sector. In this way, a sense of crisis was constructed not only regarding the present day, but also the uncertain future. Based on the proposals made about the public sector's future, all corporatist actors had a similar macroeconomic perspective on the need for reform and balance. Although the severity of the situation was established to a much higher degree by the government and employers' associations, the trade union confederations had somewhat similar views. The problem representations of public sector spending then emphasized the related uncertainties and threats and their subordinate relation to the private sector. Debt was also constructed as a national-level threat. In practice, feminized work in the public sector was constructed as parasitical, because the private sector was said to be threatened by public expenditure. These types of gendered aspects were nonetheless ignored, and the problem representations were built on the basis that gender was not important in the broad economic picture.

## 5.2 | Competitiveness legislation and corporatist conflict politicizes gender equality

Next, we discuss the politicization of gender equality in the context of the Pact's negotiations and further contextualize this within the intensifying conflict between the labor market parties. When trade union confederations refused to accept the government's initial proposals, the government took the initiative to announce alternative competitiveness legislation, which in turn threatened the traditional decision-making role of trade union confederations. The proposed legislation included several measures that mostly affected the feminized public sector, such as reducing employers' contributions to social security payments, which were instead to be paid by the state, and reducing the maximum holiday time and pay in the public sector.

As the competitiveness legislation would have bypassed the role of the trade union confederations, they became more critical of the negotiations. The trade union confederations began to focus on gender equality and the public sector to critique the government while establishing alternatives to the legislation, which marked a shift in their problem representations. However, their approach was contradictory, as some of their suggestions were similarly gendered and would undermine gender equality and the feminized public sector. The trade union confederations' discourse may best be understood as being effective rhetoric used to improve their position as well as to weaken the government and the employers. It also disrupted the anticipatory regime of crisis by framing crisis management as unjust and the legislation as poorly designed and planned.

The main focus of the trade union confederations was acquiring a better negotiation position for the Pact, as can be seen in their discourse, which critiques the entire negotiation process.

Akava made the following claim:

The objectives of the employees were not even discussed in the negotiations in August, and the employers did not bring their own list to the bargaining table. It was not a true negotiation at any point (Akava, 14.9.2015).

This commentary on the negotiations highlights that the trade union confederations saw that it was necessary to pressure the government and that they needed to present themselves as a reasonable negotiating partner. Injustice in the negotiations process was then reflected in the injustice of the competitiveness legislation, the substance of which was harshly critiqued by the employees. A particularly important role was given to the figures of “unfairly targeted” and “low-paid public sector women” (Elomäki et al., 2016; Kylä-Laaso, M., & Koskinen Sandberg, 2020). This figure is an effective and potent way of resisting legislation.

It is entirely impossible to understand how the problems of the export sector or the so-called cost-competitiveness problems could be solved in any way by cutting the wages, holidays or overtime compensation of women and men in the public sector (STTK, 14.9.2015).

This critique attacked the logic of the gendered cuts that were targeting the public sector and the broader logic of public sector spending being a drain on private sector competitiveness. Indeed, the STTK further claimed that “impairing women's working rights means the government is only paying lip service to gender equality” (STTK, 8.9.2015). Overall, the STTK was very vocal on these issues, highlighting, several times, the gendered implications and unfair treatment of the public sector. Akava, in turn, was concerned about educated women who are working in the public sector, and the SAK raised similar concerns about the impact on its members. The trade unions all agreed that the competitiveness of the Finnish economy and the private sector should not be achieved at the expense of the public sector. This meant that gender equality was positioned, for a while, as a central aspect of economic policy.

However, the trade union confederations' discourse proved contradictory. While with their criticism of the competitiveness legislation, they positioned themselves as defenders of gender equality, they mostly failed to take gender into account in their proposals. In response to the legislation, the trade union confederations developed their own alternative competitiveness packages. Publishing SAK's alternatives, in particular, was important. The crisis agreement of SAK included the temporary establishment of “Finland's model” for future wage negotiations (SAK, 24.9.2015; 24.11, 2015). In this model, wage negotiations in the export sector set a cap for wage negotiations in other sectors. This would have strengthened the status quo in the labor markets and reduced the possibilities of public sector employees bridging the gender pay gap. SAK did, however, propose the inclusion of a one-time “equality payment”, although the substance of this measure was not discussed in detail. SAK's proposal was cast in a contradictory light; however, they also once again criticized the government for targeting the public sector:

[The government] is now trying to improve Finnish competitiveness by weakening the economic position of women. The government must now create a possibility for equal wage policy and support the efforts of the labor market parties in creating a more equal Finland. (SAK, 2.11.2015)

Akava had also established a heightened sense of crisis, as they found the basic premise of the government nonetheless justified and retained a focus on the need to balance public sector spending. “The government acts entirely correctly by trying to secure the continuity of the welfare society and the balance of the public sector through its decisions” (Akava, 8.9.2015).

It can be seen, then, that the trade unions did not entirely abandon the anticipatory regime of crisis. Although they attacked it on moral grounds, this was targeted toward unfair cuts and reforms. The status quo of gendered labor markets was still taken for granted. The issue of gender equality was brought to broader economic policy-making but selectively. The trade union confederations were then simultaneously criticizing individual gendered cuts and accepting the overarching logic of subjugating the feminized public sector to the needs of the export industries. As gender equality had become an effectively loaded issue that involved heightened public attention, focusing on it provided a stronger position in the eyes of the public.

Despite a good overall reception, the government insisted that the SAK's crisis agreement was not good enough. SAK's proposal of the export-driven wage-setting model was welcomed by EK, however (EK, 28.9.2015). The problem representations promoted by the government and employers mostly ignored gender equality. Instead, they characterized corporatism as an outdated system that was unable to change with the times, threatening Finland's survival in global markets and as a welfare state (EK, 20.5.2015; Government, 16.9.2015). The government targeted trade unions and their power by suggesting that they were causing economic problems for Finland.

The municipal sector employers' association, KT, was concerned that the legislation would treat public sector employers worse than those in the private sector. They nonetheless mainly retained their alignment with the government and with the EK, utilizing the rhetoric of a shared sacrifice; they argued that improving the economy and balancing the public sector "now requires sacrifices from everyone" (KT, 30.11.2015). This rhetoric of shared sacrifice is like that of Akava, for example, who suggested that while reforms and cuts are necessary, they must be fair: "Structural reforms must be done, but in a way that they treat everyone equally" (Akava, 24.9.2015).

As Brown (2015) has assessed, neoliberal policies often demand a "shared sacrifice": a willingness to accept cuts to services or wages, for example, for national and common societal good. The discourse of the trade union confederations utilized this concept for their own benefit, demanding that the "shared sacrifice" should also equal. At the same time, however, this discourse was limited to imminent changes in employment relations and not to larger structures of wage negotiations. This is not too surprising, as dismissing questions of gender equality has been found typical in Finnish corporatism (Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019, Saari et al., in press).

### 5.3 | Reaching a gendered consensus

The trade union confederations found some degree of success as the legislation began to encounter severe challenges in terms of unpopularity and issues of lawfulness. Because of this, employers and employees again returned to the negotiations, which were under mounting pressure to reach some type of agreement. These negotiations also meant that concerns regarding gender equality, as a central point of negotiations, began to recede. In February 2016, an agreement was finally reached, following changes that included the transfer of social security payments from employers to employees, 30% cuts in public sector holiday pay, and the extension of working hours without any pay increase. Also, there was preliminary agreement on the export-driven wage-setting model, also known as Finland's model. This measure was accepted in return for tax reductions, and the government promised the trade unions that all future work-related legislation would be developed in collaboration with labor market parties. The end of the negotiations saw the trade union confederations once again fully aligning themselves with the anticipatory regime of crisis in return for retaining a core role in corporatist decision-making. The necessity of the cuts was emphasized, along with the lack of alternatives; this was the best the trade union confederations could do to save the Finnish economy.

The Pact's finalization marked a distinct change in the trade union confederations' rhetoric, and only Akava and the STTK made explicit (and brief) subsequent reference to gender. Akava deemed it unfortunate that those who endured the consequences of the decision were public sector workers (Akava, 3.6.2016) and stated that it understood "the fears of low-wage women" (Akava, 17.3.2016). STTK, however, used more effectively loaded language. "The greatest shame of the Competitiveness Pact is that the holiday pay of public sector employees will be cut by 30% for the next three years" (STTK, 1.5.2016).

However, these quotes are an exception, as the trade union confederations sought to soften these gendered consequences by various means, replacing the language of gender, women, and (in)equality with the reference to a gender-neutral public sector. Impacts were characterized as impacting *all* wage earners, implying a “shared sacrifice” that nonetheless treated different groups differently.

Finland's model was legitimized by the SAK, which argued that it would “support the competitiveness of sectors that are exposed to international competition—and the balance of the public sector” (SAK, 14.3.2016). Privileging the export sector was now presented as an economic reality in a self-evident fashion, as shown by a quote from the STTK.

[Finland's model] means that the unions in the export sector would always open up the bargaining rounds and the unions in the public sector, for example, could not negotiate better agreements than the industries. (STTK 19.5.2016)

EK (23.6.2016) later confirmed this as the goal of Finland's model. Despite this, the SAK later claimed that the objective was to achieve a “new solidaristic wage-model innovation,” which would not cause the sedimentation of wage development in the public sector (SAK, 22.11.2016). STTK made a similar assessment that the question of wage equality should somehow be incorporated into the model (STTK, 12.10.2016). The question of how this would be achieved was excluded from both the Pact and corporatist actors' problem representations. Although the negotiations on Finland's model later collapsed due to disagreements in the labor markets, it has since remained one of the key arguments in collective bargaining against wage increases in the public sector. In this way, the anticipatory regime of crisis is being reproduced. The public sector remains a central threat to national competitiveness and the Finnish wage-bargaining model.

While it was arguably difficult for the trade union confederations to accept the Pact, maintaining institutional continuity was important for them. It seems likely that the discourse of gender equality was used mainly as a tactic to delay and criticize competitiveness legislation and to reduce any threat to corporatism's future. Subsequently, the focus on the public sector enabled trade unions to avoid inflicting cuts on all employees. Discussing austerity, Coleman (2016) has suggested that an orientation toward the future becomes one of survival, which arguably might have been the main goal of the trade union confederations too. Accepting the Pact was a way of retaining corporatist structures and the political legitimacy of the labor movement.

## 6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This article combined theories of anticipatory regimes (Adams et al., 2009) with a policy-constructivist approach (Bacchi, 1999) to explore policy-making in the context of competitiveness and austerity. This article contributes to the literature on gendered corporatism and austerity. We show (1) how neoliberal economic and governmental policies exacerbate gender inequality in the labor market *with the consent of trade unions*, (2) how gender equality in the labor markets can become a central bargaining tool without attaining proper legitimacy, and (3) how an anticipatory regime of crisis may be constructed and attached to the public sector, which positions the public sector as a threat to competitiveness and a source of potential crisis and uncertainty.

Our first research question focused on the problem representations that the corporatist actors constructed regarding competitiveness measures and their gendered implications. The analysis of these problem representations shows how the power dynamics of corporatism forced the Finnish trade union confederations to align more closely with gendered neoliberal austerity policies. It also shows that the trade union confederations followed an economic rationale that is already highly gendered and gives the feminized public sector a subordinate position to the export sector. Privileging competitiveness over reproductive work was then a central aspect of corporatist actors' problem representations. Because of this, gender equality became a bargaining tool in corporatist power struggles instead of a core aspect of policy-making.

Our second research question focused on how problem representations were also used in the construction of an anticipatory regime of crisis that legitimized competitiveness measures. We suggest that a central aspect of problem representations is that they are not only responses to existing problems but may also focus on possible future problems and anticipate them. Although it was argued that Finland was already in a crisis, the Competitiveness Pact was, more importantly, legitimized by arguing that without balancing the public sector and improving competitiveness, the crisis would intensify and cause immense damage to the nation.

We showed that although the trade union confederations were willing to defend gender equality, their problem representations were nonetheless embedded in an anticipatory regime of crisis. This resulted in a contradictory position, where trade unions may simultaneously defend the public sector while also giving it a secondary role in the economy and the labor markets. While gender equality provided an effectively loaded point of resistance for trade union confederations, this was only in the context of the most immediate policy changes. Their macroeconomic positions remained relatively similar throughout the negotiations, focusing on the need to balance the public sector and improve its productivity without proper consideration of that goal's gender-related impacts.

The problem of the gendered division of labor and wage inequality in Finland was ignored in hopes of improving the private sector's competitiveness. The feminized public sector was instead constructed as a problem for competitiveness, as is apparent in the agreement over the "Finland model," in which the export sector was made to be a pacesetter for wage negotiations in Finland, and that should not be surpassed by other sectors. As the model was suggested by the trade union confederation, SAK, it appears that competitiveness in some form was the hegemonic goal for all corporatist actors, despite the negotiation's difficulty. This may be because the trade union confederations, too, largely accepted neoliberal logic as the correct response to the economic crisis.

In this present case, it seems clear that the trade unions' most pressing concern was to preserve the power and legitimacy of the corporatist system, which forced them to adapt and give their consent to the competitiveness measures that had negative effects on gender equality. Competitiveness policies based on reduced labor costs were largely accepted, but the gendered cuts were then diverted to the public sector in return for corporatist continuity.

The Competitiveness Pact was perceived as unfair, especially by public sector employees, who ended up paying the highest price for restoring national competitiveness. Since its implementation, the Pact remains a topic of ongoing debate. With the outbreak of COVID-19, the valuation of essential care workers in feminized occupations seems to be extraordinarily high, but as public debt increases at the state and municipal levels, it might also be challenging to translate these valuations into negotiating power during collective bargaining.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest present.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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