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# **Is Finnish corporatism reconfiguring, and is it good for gender equality?**

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## **Abstract**

The Nordic model of employment relations, characterised by centralised collective bargaining and strong collaboration between social partners and the state, has often been linked to positive gender equality outcomes. Although the Nordic model has maintained stability even in the economic crisis of 2008, the Finnish labour market was faced with neoliberal pressures for change, liberalisation and decentralisation and a belief in the necessity of internal devaluation to restore national competitiveness. This chapter focuses on recent developments within the Finnish corporatist system and whether these changes have implications for gender equality. We argue that Finnish corporatism has not always been positive for gender equality: centralised collective bargaining has not been able to tackle the gender pay gap, and labour market organisations have watered down state gender equality policies. We analyse and evaluate recent events and reconfigurations in Finnish corporatism using four case examples from our previous research.

**Keywords:** corporatism, Nordic model, gender equality, industrial relations, policymaking

## Introduction

Corporatism refers to a societal system where the social partners have significant power over legislation and policymaking (e.g. Bergqvist, 2006; Koskinen Sandberg, 2018; Siaroff, 1999; Vesa et al., 2018). This chapter focuses on recent developments and changes within the Finnish corporatist system and how these changes are connected to other societal developments, namely, changes within the broader gender equality context and policymaking in Finland. We coin the term *reconfigured corporatism* to refer to the changes in two key aspects of corporatism: collective bargaining on wages and working conditions and the strong collaboration between labour market organisations and the state in all policymaking, that is, peak and routine corporatism (Vesa et al., 2018). In addition to the reconfiguration, we also analyse the resilience and continuity of Finnish corporatism and how it impacts gender equality goals.

The Nordic model of employment relations, characterised by centralised collective bargaining and strong collaboration between social partners and the state, has been widely admired. The Nordic model has often been linked with positive outcomes for society and the labour force (e.g. Kettunen, 2012), as well as positive impacts on gender equality (e.g. Grönlund et al., 2017). Indeed, compared to countries where union density has dramatically declined and collective bargaining has weakened and decentralised, the Nordic model may seem ideal for achieving higher gender equality. In practice, however, the picture remains more complex, and the positive impacts of gender equality are not self-evident in all cases.

While collective bargaining has declined in several national contexts over past decades and there has been a trend towards greater decentralisation (Marginson, 2015; Schnabel et al., 2006; van Gyes & Schulten, 2015), the Finnish industrial relations system has remained surprisingly stable.

Even during the current period, characterised by the rise of neoliberal ideas, the primacy of national competitiveness and austerity rather than traditional Nordic welfare state policies and solidarity in wage bargaining, the corporatist system has prevailed (e.g. Bergström & Styhre, in press; Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019; Vesa et al., 2018). Nevertheless, there have been several examples of turmoil that suggest that corporatism and corporatist power relations are also reconfiguring in Finland (Jonker-Hoffrén, 2019, 2020; Kylä-Laaso et al., in press). The main employers' federation has withdrawn from centralised, cross-sectoral bargaining (Jonker-Hoffrén, 2020), and more recently, some sectoral industry confederations have also withdrawn from sectoral bargaining (Liiten et al., 2020). Moreover, there are examples of the government taking a stronger policymaking role in fields where policies have previously been negotiated between labour market organisations and the government, including gender equality policy (e.g. Elomäki et al., 2021). Trade union confederations, in particular, are worried about losing their power positions due to these reconfigurations.

The 2010s oversaw several changes to gender equality and gender equality policy. An increasing emphasis on neoliberalism, visible in gendered austerity and competitiveness policies, as well as the rise of conservative views and right-wing populism pushed gender equality goals aside from the political agenda (Elomäki & Kantola, 2018; Kantola et al., 2020). However, gender equality concerns regained political visibility in 2019 with Sanna Marin's internationally renowned female-dominated and even feminist government. This change has had implications for policymaking, where the social partners have had to adapt to a new, sometimes less powerful, role.

In this chapter, we examine the implications of the Finnish corporatist system and its recent reconfigurations for gender equality. Building on our own previous research on gender, power and the Finnish corporatist system, we focus on four case studies from the 2010s that illustrate the

gender equality outcomes of the Finnish corporatist system and its shifting power dynamics. These cases illustrate how the two key aspects of the Finnish corporatist system – collective bargaining and policymaking participation – impact gender equality. The cases also exemplify recent changes in dynamics and power relations within the corporatist system, both in terms of collective bargaining and policymaking. Based on our cases, we ask: How is the Finnish corporatist system gendered, and what are the impacts on gender equality? How has this system been reconfigured recently, and with what implications for gender equality?

We argue that despite its positive reputation, Finnish corporatism has not always been particularly positive for gender equality: centralised collective bargaining has not been able to tackle the gender pay gap and has indeed in some cases maintained the gap, and labour market organisations have watered down state gender equality policies. Recent shifts in corporatist dynamics and power relations have made it possible to address some of these problems, but the changes have also created new challenges. For example, the current emphasis on the export industry-driven model of collective bargaining permanently positions the feminised public sector behind male-dominated industries (Kylä-Laaso et al., in press; see also Erikson in this volume, Wagner and Teigen in this volume).

This chapter contributes to discussions about gender and corporatism by providing a broad overview of the gender equality implications of corporatist systems by considering two key aspects of corporatism: collective bargaining and the influence of labour market organisations in political decision-making. Furthermore, the chapter provides a reflection on how recent changes in corporatism and corporatist power relations also identified in other countries influence gender equality.

## **Finnish corporatism and its reconfigurations**

Finland can be defined as a strongly corporatist country according to various economic and political criteria: high union density, interest groups' active involvement in policy formation and decision-making and relatively centralised wage bargaining (e.g. Kauppinen, 2005; Kiander et al., 2011; Vesa et al., 2018). To better understand the dimensions of Finnish corporatism and its implications for gender equality, we distinguish between collective bargaining ('peak corporatism') and the representation of labour market organisations' interests in policy formulation ('routine corporatism') (see Vesa et al., 2018). In terms of collective bargaining, for several decades the defining feature of the Finnish system was centralised agreements, the so-called incomes policy agreements, that set the framework for wage increases in industry-level collective agreements and also entailed initiatives on social policy, taxes and occasionally gender equality (Martikainen, 2000).

In terms of policymaking, Finland, like other Nordic countries, has a long tradition of giving labour market organisations a privileged role in policy formulation (Vesa et al., 2018; Elomäki et al., 2021; Koskinen Sandberg, 2016). Employment and social policies have often been negotiated through tripartite working groups between the state, employers' organisations and trade unions, and labour market parties participate in various committees and councils where policies are drafted. This system has given central labour market organisations a dual role in shaping gender equality outcomes: they have a role in institutionalising wage relativities between the male- and female-dominated sectors in the labour market, and they protect their vested interests in gender equality policy.

As in many other countries (Brandl and Bechter, 2019; see Rafstedt in this volume), there has been a shift towards decentralisation in collective bargaining in Finland in recent years (e.g. Jonker-Hoffrén, 2019; Kiander et al., 2011; Visser, 2016). In 2008, the Confederation of Finnish Industries (the biggest employers' organisation) announced that it would no longer negotiate centralised incomes policy agreements, and in 2015, it formally changed its rules and withdrew from centralised negotiations, leaving centralised trade union confederations without a negotiating partner (Jonker-Hoffrén, 2019). Since 2015, Finland has followed the example of other Nordic countries, such as Sweden and Denmark, and taken up an industry-level model of collective bargaining (see Wagner and Teigen in this volume, Erikson in this volume). In this model, each sector negotiates its own agreements, and the export industry acts as a pacesetter for wage increases for the entire labour market. In parallel, employers and the political right have pushed for local bargaining, and in 2020 and 2021, important sectoral employer organisations (the forestry and technology industries) announced that they would begin to agree on working conditions at the company level.

In past decades, state intervention to reshape employment relations has become a key feature of capitalism, and states have taken an active role, particularly in the context of economic crises (Howell, 2021). Paradoxically perhaps, this has sometimes involved externalising difficult decisions to social partners (Bergström & Styhre, in press). This has been the case in Finland too. In the aftermath of the 2007–2008 economic crisis, the state pushed labour market organisations to adopt a competitiveness-enhancing social pact (our Case 1) that shifted costs from employers to employees and weakened working conditions by threatening even harsher legislative measures (Adkins et al., 2019; Kylä-Laaso & Koskinen Sandberg, 2020; Kylä-Laaso et al., in press).

Routine corporatism also shows some signs of reconfiguration in Finland, as governments have taken a stronger role in policymaking vis-a-vis labour market organisations. On the one hand, the Finnish government has pushed labour market organisations to adopt neoliberal reforms regarding pensions and unemployment benefits and thereby externalised decisions on restructuring the welfare state to labour market organisations. On the other hand, the government has implemented ‘activating’ cuts in unemployment benefits despite trade unions’ opposition, pushing them into a more consultative role. Finnish governments have also played a stronger role in tripartite working groups in the field of gender equality policy (Elomäki et al., 2021).

In Finland, employer organisations have historically been supportive of – or at least consented to – the corporatist system and have not tried to demolish it (Korpi, 2006). A central reason for this is that the system has mainly been beneficial for them. It has been argued that employers have been able to use corporatist processes as tools to advance neoliberal ideas and welfare state reform since the 1990s and even earlier (Wuokko, 2019; see also e.g. Boumans, in press). Some have read the withdrawal of employers from centralised negotiations as a sign of them giving up power. We suggest, however, that their use of power might have become more covert. For example, the sectoral bargaining round of 2019–2020 (Case 2) witnessed strong employer coordination that shaped outcomes, even when formally this was supposed to be a union round of collective bargaining. Further, we argue that employers and business-interest organisations are still interested in being involved in tripartite policy processes and representing their interests.

Altogether, there are seven central labour market organisations in Finland, three for employees and four for employers. The three trade union confederations are the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK), the Finnish Confederation of Salaried Employees (STTK) and the Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland (AKAVA). The four



employer organisations are the Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK); Local Government Employers (KT); the Commission for Church Employers (KIT), representing the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland; and the Office for the Government as Employer (VTML). Although the number of women in key positions in labour market organisations has increased, these organisations remain highly gendered, masculine institutions, and ‘women’s interests’ may be perceived as separate from or even contrary to key interests (e.g. Saari, 2016).

### **Advancing gender equality through collective bargaining**

All Nordic countries have high levels of gender segregation in the labour market, but Finland has the highest (Grönlund et al., 2016). In Finland, women tend to work in the public sector, while men typically work in the private sector, specifically in the construction and export industries. Due to neoliberalism and austerity, public sector services at the core of the Finnish and Nordic welfare state models have been placed under strict budgetary control (e.g. Adkins et al., 2019; Kylä-Laaso & Koskinen Sandberg, 2020). The welfare state had a role in creating a secondary position for women in the labour market by employing women within public services. The welfare state has relied – and still relies – heavily on inexpensive female labour (see Hernes, 1987; Koskinen Sandberg, 2018, 2021). It is therefore no surprise that the gender pay gap in Finland, at 16.6 percentage points in 2019, is high compared to the remainder of Europe (EIGE, 2019).

In some countries, gender equality issues are advanced through equality bargaining, which refers to advancing gender equality within collective bargaining (e.g. Colling & Dickens, 1998; Martikainen, 2000; Williamson & Baird, 2014, Milner and Pochic in this volume). The concept of equality bargaining is not in active use in Finland, although some issues linked to gender equality are negotiated at the collective bargaining table, such as details of parental leave within a specific

collective agreement. In addition, feminised occupations, such as nursing, frequently bring the question of equal pay to the collective negotiations (Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019; Saari et al., 2021). In the late 1980s and 1990s, however, gender equality and equal pay were acknowledged in the negotiations of the incomes policy agreements, and specific ‘gender equality supplements’ were allocated several times to narrow the gender pay gap (Martikainen, 2000). Although not specifically targeting women, ‘low pay supplements’ were already allocated in the 1970s. While some small progress was made, these supplements were mostly symbolic. The Finnish solidaristic wage policy has aimed at producing ‘fair outcomes’ for the labour force, but it has been relatively gender blind and has not acknowledged the structural features of the Finnish labour market and collective bargaining system that negatively affect wage levels for feminised occupations.

From the perspective of a large body of earlier scholarship, critiquing the Finnish centralised collective bargaining system might seem odd. Earlier scholarship indicates that centralised and regulated industrial relations systems are often associated with smaller average gender pay gaps (e.g. Colling & Dickens, 1998; Mandel & Semyonov, 2005; Rubery et al., 1997). From the perspective of countries where union density has dramatically declined and collective bargaining has weakened and become very decentralised, the Nordic model may sound ideal. In practice, the picture is more complex. While collective agreements have typically been viewed as gender neutral, closer examination reveals that they are gendered and can have gendered consequences for the working conditions and wages of men and women. The complex structure of Finnish collective agreements and centralised bargaining has maintained the historical gendered hierarchy between male-dominated and female-dominated jobs and occupations and offered legitimacy for gender-based wage disparities (e.g. Koskinen Sandberg et al., 2018).

The difficulties in changing these structures are illustrated by the well-known case of Nancy the Nurse in 2007. On the surface, the nurses' union's actions in 2006–2007 were a victory and resulted in the government and employers' organisations giving in to their demands for wage increases (Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019; Saari et al., 2021). The conservative National Coalition Party had taken a political role by making an election pledge to increase the underpaid women's sector wages, and the party was held to account for its election promise by nurses' unions once in government. This was later rejected as a dangerous example. However, research has since pointed to the persistence of gendered structures and shows that the pay increases evaporated (Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019; Saari et al., 2021). In 2007, the male-dominated export sectors also negotiated the same level of pay increases. This is an interesting contrast to Sweden, where a one-off initiative to increase low-paid public sector salaries was successful (see Erikson, in press; Erikson in this volume). In Finland, in contrast, despite the failure to increase nurses' relative wages and diminish the gender pay gap, Nancy the Nurse was blamed in public discourse for Finland's loss of competitiveness because of the excessive wage increases on the eve of the financial and economic crisis of 2008 (Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019; Saari et al., 2021).

### **Labour market organisations shaping gender equality policy**

For decades, Finland has had an active state gender equality policy and relatively strong gender equality institutions. This policy has, however, suffered from the weakness of the chosen instruments and implementation problems (Kantola & Holli, 2007). Active collaboration between state gender equality actors, women's organisations and women and feminists across political parties has played a key role in advancing specific gender equality initiatives, such as children's

universal right to day care (Holli, 2008). However, tripartite collaboration between the state, employers' organisations and trade unions has played at least as important a role in shaping policy outcomes (Elomäki et al., 2021; Koskinen Sandberg, 2016; Salmi & Lammi-Taskula, 2014). This has often – but not always – posed barriers for policy adoption and implementation.

In past decades, several key gender equality reforms have been agreed upon between the labour market organisations and the state, either as part of the incomes policy agreements or in tripartite working groups. This has meant that reforms have been negotiated behind closed doors and had to be approved by both the government and the labour market parties (Koskinen Sandberg, 2016; Saari, 2016; Salmi & Lammi-Taskula, 2014). Tripartite negotiations are always compromises between the interests of the different parties, and the results might be disappointing from a gender equality perspective. For example, in the early 2000s, efforts to increase parental leave earmarked for fathers were stalled in corporatist negotiations. Employers especially resisted father's quotas due to the high costs (Lammi-Taskula & Takala, 2009). In past years, however, all labour market organisations, including employers, have expressed their support for fathers' quotas (Elomäki et al., 2021). Furthermore, pay equality reforms, such as the guidance for pay comparisons included in the Gender Equality Act, have been watered down in corporatist policy processes. Employers have managed to suppress issues that threaten their interests, such as comparing wages across sectors or between collective agreements (Koskinen Sandberg, 2016).

In the 2010s, Finnish labour market organisations took a more proactive and publicly visible role in gender equality policy, partly in response to the temporary U-turn in governmental gender equality policy due to austerity and the rise of conservatism and right-wing populism (Elomäki et al., 2019). Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's right-conservative-populist government (2015–2019) adopted several austerity and competitiveness measures that had negative impacts on gender

equality (see Case 1) and significantly weakened Finnish gender equality policy (Elomäki & Kantola, 2018; Kantola et al., 2020). Even in this context, labour market parties' constructions of gender equality and inequality, as well as their proposed solutions, remain entangled in their own vested interests. The gender equality positions of Finnish labour market organisations focus mainly on labour market issues and try to advance the interests of the organisations' own membership rather than broader gender equality goals (Elomäki et al., 2019). Raising certain issues onto the agenda has also been used to distract public attention from other issues that could potentially be equally relevant but which the labour market organisations wish to avoid.

### **Cases and materials**

We explore the complex relationships between gender, power and the Finnish corporatist system and its recent reconfigurations through four case studies from the 2010s – a time of turmoil in both Finnish corporatism and the gender equality context. Most of our cases are linked to wages, equal pay and collective bargaining, while one is on parental leave reform. We analyse some central trends in how Finnish corporatism is changing and how it has become challenged by several actors, including not only the government but also civil society. We also analyse how reconfiguring corporatism is linked to central gender equality goals and the reasons why the Finnish corporatist system is currently facing challenges. Furthermore, we analyse continuity in the corporatist system, as continuity can be equally significant for reaching (or not reaching) gender equality goals. We have studied most of these cases in depth in our earlier research, and here our aim is to go beyond them and draw broader conclusions about gender, power and Finnish corporatism. The four cases are the following:

- 1) Policy debates and negotiations on the ‘Competitiveness Pact’, a neoliberal policy reform that aimed at lowering labour costs and targeted the feminised public sector in particular (based on Kylä-Laaso & Koskinen Sandberg, 2020, and Kylä-Laaso et al., in press).
- 2) Sectoral and local bargaining for nurses’ pay increases in the context of the COVID-19 crisis (a more recent case we have not previously analysed).
- 3) Civil society challenging established actors in local government sector wage determination, using the case of the NoPlayMoney social movement as an example (based on Koskinen Sandberg, 2021).
- 4) The failed attempt to reform the Finnish family leave system that took place during the right-conservative PM Sipilä’s government in 2017–2018 (based on Elomäki et al., 2021).

All these cases rely on different datasets. The research data consisted primarily of documentary material, which included public statements (e.g. position papers, press releases, and blogs) of labour market organisations and other key actors (Cases 1, 2, and 4), parliamentary debates (1), government documents (1 and 4), as well as media articles (2 and 3). In Cases 3 and 4, documentary material was complemented with interviews with key actors involved in the process.

The analysis of all the cases relied on deconstructive feminist policy analysis, which understands the meaning of gender equality as an outcome of constant political struggles (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017). Our analyses were informed by a study of policy processes that emphasises the actors involved, as well as negotiations, resistance and opposition (Bergqvist et al., 2016; Engeli & Mazur, 2018). This includes struggles in framing policy problems and solutions (Bacchi, 2009) and tactics of non-decision-making to limit the scope of the policy process to noncontroversial issues and keep gender equality issues or specific policy measures off the political agenda

(Bachrach & Baratz, 1963) in the agenda-setting and adoption phases, as well as different strategies of resistance during implementation (Engeli & Mazur, 2018). Our analyses paid particular attention to the power relations and conflicting interests that shape the policy process, the ways in which the actors involved in the processes tried to influence the outcomes, as well as in the shifting forms of public governance that influence policy processes and policy measures (Elomäki & Ylöstalo, in press). In the analysis that follows, we first discuss the first three cases, which are connected to peak corporatism or collective bargaining. We then move on to routine corporatism and labour market organisations' role in policymaking.

### **Reconfigurations and Continuity in Peak Corporatism: Struggles over the Value and Cost of Feminised Work**

This section elaborates on the recent reconfigurations of peak corporatism, notably the government's efforts to challenge the corporatist system with the aim of increasing the cost competitiveness and decentralisation of collective bargaining. It also addresses some of the central challenges of Finnish corporatism from a gender perspective: the question of the undervaluation of feminised public sector work and the growing dissatisfaction of the employees of this sector with the collective bargaining system.

*The Competitiveness Pact: Trading gender equality for the institutional continuity of the corporatist system*

The Competitiveness Pact was a neoliberal policy reform that aimed at lowering labour costs and targeted the feminised public sector in particular. It was also an attempt to change power relations within Finnish corporatism by forcing trade unions to agree to weakening working conditions and

restricting the right to bargain collectively, as the government planned to implement binding legislation instead. The Pact was initiated by the centre-right-populist PM Sipilä's government (2015–2019) and negotiated with the social partners. In 2015, in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, the newly elected PM Sipilä stated that something needed to be done to 'save the country'. Austerity measures and national competitiveness were also central in the strategic government programme *Finland – Land of Solutions* (Prime Minister's Office, 2015).

The Pact's central aim was to increase the competitiveness of the Finnish economy. This aim could be achieved by either lowering labour costs by 5% or increasing work hours by 100 hours a year without pay increases. These demands were hard for the trade unions to accept. When the long and difficult negotiations did not produce results, the government started to plan an alternative competitiveness package to enforce its goals. The package would have prevented the labour market parties from negotiating some terms normally agreed upon in collective agreements.

The labour market parties reached a consensus on the Pact in Spring 2016. The Pact entailed cuts in certain pay components, such as cutting the holiday pay of public sector employees for three years (approximately half a month's extra salary that is paid annually), shifting social insurance contributions from employers to employees by 1.20%, shifting social security payments from employers to the state by varying degrees but at least by 0.58%, and adding 24 unpaid extra annual working hours.

In the policy debate, the negative gender equality impacts of the Competitiveness Pact became a central argument for resisting these policy measures. Still, the trade union confederations ultimately gave in to the policy measures demanded by the government. This case shows that relatively gender-equal states with strong corporatist traditions, such as Finland, may align with



neoliberal austerity policies with gendered implications (for details, see Kylä-Laaso et al., in press). In this context, trade unions are forced to adapt to the neoliberal logic of policy formulation to retain the institutional continuity of the corporatist system.

The legacy of the Competitiveness Pact is controversial. It had severe impacts on the feminised public sector, which were visible in the statistics soon after the Pact's implementation. Wages stagnated, especially in the already low-paid local government sector, and cutting 30% from the holiday pay of the public sector employees also impacted annual earnings (Official Statistics of Finland). Even with its negative gender impacts, some, including several economists and politicians, consider the Competitiveness Pact a success. It might be partly the result of lucky timing, but there were some positive developments observable in the Finnish labour market; for example, the employment rate rose significantly. Still, the Pact was very unpopular among the Finnish people, and it took a toll on PM Sipilä's political career and the popularity of his Centre Party, which suffered a rather dramatic defeat in the 2019 parliamentary elections.

#### *Sectoral bargaining for nurses' wage increases in the context of COVID-19*

Our second case – bargaining for wage increases and COVID-19 bonuses for nurses in the context of the COVID-19 crisis – addresses the reconfiguration of Finnish corporatism through the decentralisation of collective bargaining and the implications of this key reconfiguration of Finnish corporatism for pay equality and feminised health care workers. As discussed above, collective bargaining in Finland has moved to the industry level, and in the new model, the export industry sets the pace for wage increases (Jonker-Hoffrén, 2019). The 2019–2020 collective bargaining round began in autumn 2019, when the male-dominated export industries negotiated a salary increase of 3.3% over two years. The negotiations of the feminised local government sector began

in January 2020. Nurses' unions had four key demands: removal of the additional unpaid hours included in the Competitiveness Pact, salary increases at least as high as those of the export industry, nurses' own collective agreement and a state-funded pay equality programme (Tehy & Super, 2020a). The unions argued that nurses' salaries should increase 1.8 percentage points more than those of male-dominated sectors for 10 years and that the state should commit 100–150 billion euros a year for this purpose (Tehy & Super, 2020b). The COVID-19 pandemic, which hit after the start of the negotiations, significantly increased the burden on nurses and other healthcare workers. The state of emergency made it possible to cancel and postpone holidays and force healthcare workers to work, and the lack of protective gear was a pressing problem. This led to an additional demand: a €1000 COVID-19 bonus for nurses to be funded by the state (Tehy and Super, 2020c).

During the difficult negotiations, nurses' unions appealed to the government several times but with no result. Agreement was finally reached after more than four months of negotiations. The unpaid working hour provision was scrapped and the nurses were promised a separate collective agreement, but the deal was disappointing regarding money. Nurses' pay increases remained below those of export industries, and the worsened economic situation postponed discussions about the long-term pay equality programme. Moreover, the government refused to fund the COVID-19 bonuses.

Nurses continued to push for COVID-19 bonuses after the bargaining round was concluded, but with little impact. The pandemic made explicit that work done within the feminised public sector is vital, but unlike many other countries, Finland has not provided additional compensation for health care workers. We suggest that shifting corporatist power dynamics played a role. Trade unions argued that the state should provide the funding, but according to the government, the

responsibility was on the labour market parties. The government's position was opposite its stance in the Competitiveness Pact, as stated by PM Marin in a TV debate:

The government and the parliament are not labour market parties. We do not negotiate salaries and working conditions. It is very important to make clear that labour market parties negotiate these questions. We cannot go down the road of political auctioning on people's salaries (MTV, 2020).

Like the NoPlayMoney case (case 3), local government employers escaped responsibility by arguing that the issue should be tackled at the workplace level (YLE, 2020). However, local bargaining for COVID-19 bonuses has proven remarkably ineffective: only a few municipalities and private healthcare companies have provided bonuses.

The decentralised bargaining for nurses' wage increases and corona-bonuses shows the effects of recent shifts in corporatist power relations on gender equality. The incomes policy agreements, despite maintaining gendered hierarchies and wage relativities, allowed the state to push for equal-pay initiatives. The shift to industry-level bargaining has meant that the state has withdrawn from equality bargaining, both in terms of political support for feminised sectors and providing the funding. Unlike in the 2007 Nancy the Nurse case (Saari et al., 2021), the government did not support nurses' demands. It also seems that, after the significant pressure exerted by PM Sipilä's government on the Competitiveness Pact (as well as PM Antti Rinne's efforts to prevent the Finnish Post from weakening the working conditions of some of its workers, which resulted in his resignation in December 2019), governments have been reluctant to interfere in labour market affairs. As the COVID-19 bonuses show, this also applies when the purpose of interfering would be to advance gender equality. Whilst the case illustrates changes in Finnish peak corporatism, it

also reveals continuity in how feminised care work remains undervalued in corporatist negotiations – whether these negotiations take place at the cross-sectoral, sectoral or local level – and even in the context of a pandemic that revealed the necessity of this work for society.

*Civil society challenge to unequal pay practices in the Finnish local government sector*

The third case focuses on a ‘wage cartel’ regarding early education teachers’ wages, activism around the wage question and the inability of the Finnish local government sector collective bargaining system to produce fair and equal wages. The case is part of the broader challenge that Finnish corporatism is facing, namely, the growing dissatisfaction of feminised, undervalued occupational groups of the public sector. In 2018, the Finnish media revealed that several municipalities in the Finnish capital area had secretly agreed not to compete with each other by paying higher wages for early education teachers, even though there was a severe shortage of labour. Instead, the three cities decided to pay the minimum wage set within the collective agreement, which was low by Finnish standards. The minimum level represents a wage that the trade union representing early education teachers agreed upon as a suitable wage level for these teachers. The revelation resulted in public outrage and the rise of the NoPlayMoney social movement, which demanded higher wages for early education teachers. The social movement, initiated on social media, mobilised thousands of people in only a few days. What is significant in this case is that civil society actors came together to challenge and resist employers and trade unions and were successful in helping obtain wage increases for early education teachers within the Finnish capital area.

The question of low pay for early education teachers is part of the broader question of the undervaluation of feminised work and the resulting gender pay gap that is institutionalised within

the Finnish collective bargaining system. In the 1960s and 1970s, the women's employment rate in Finland grew simultaneously with the expansion of the welfare state. The welfare state employed women at wage levels that were thought to be appropriate for women at the time (e.g. Kettunen, 2012). For example, after being in effect for decades, the widespread practice of paying men and women different wages had just become illegal during the growth period of the welfare state (Bergholm, 2005; Nummijärvi, 2004). Wages for feminised occupations within the welfare state, such as nurses and early education teachers, came to reflect this institutionalised practice. As collective agreements form a strong, rather stable structure in the Finnish labour market, this institutionalised practice has not been significantly challenged until rather recently.

Wages are often thought of as reflecting market factors, such as supply and demand. Thus, the wage cartel case went against everything commonly thought about how wages are determined and how labour markets work. It became clear that market forces do not determine wages in welfare state employment. Instead, there were actors who had deliberately kept the wage levels of early education teachers low. After the wage cartel was made public, there were heated discussions in the Finnish media over early education teachers' wages. The traditional actors emerged as expected, with employer cities denying the existence of the cartel and trade unions seemingly appalled by the revelation. The three cities claimed that they had simply followed the wage levels set by the collective agreements. New subject positions also emerged. Among those who were angry were ordinary citizens who wanted to do something concrete to change the situation.

NoPlayMoney used a combination of traditional and innovative means to claim higher wages for early education teachers. In March and April 2018, it held two demonstrations in which trade unions participated and politicians spoke. There was also a so-called Ask for a Pay Raise Day, when thousands of early education teachers simultaneously handed in wage requests to their

employers in which they demanded a reasonable living wage of €3000. There was clear momentum for wage increases for early education teachers, and results were achieved relatively quickly. Many cities in the Finnish capital region and surrounding areas gave pay raises of between €145 and €225 to early education teachers. In terms of percentages, these raises are quite substantial, but the wages remain low in absolute terms and are significantly less than the €3000 target. The significance of this case is the fact that unequal wage bargaining practices, in which the unions had participated, were exposed and that civil society reacted in a way that produced results.

### **Reconfigurations in Routine Corporatism: The Government Takes the Lead in Gender Equality Policy.**

Our fourth case is the failed attempt to reform the Finnish family leave system, which illustrates reconfigurations in routine corporatism. The need for family policy reform, especially the aim of increasing the quota for father's leave, has been on the policy agenda during several consecutive governments. Although Finland has a reputation as a gender-equal country with strong supporting policies, the level of family allowances is small in comparison with other Nordic countries, care responsibilities are unequally divided between the parents, and leave take-up is affected by social inequalities in the structure of Finnish society. However, the reform of the family leave system has proved notoriously challenging due to ideological differences between the political parties, compounded by the interests of central labour market organisations that have participated in the reform efforts (Lammi-Taskula & Takala, 2009; Salmi & Lammi-Taskula, 2014).

The attempt to reform the family leave policies took place during PM Sipilä's right-conservative government (2015–2019). The family leave reform was not in the government programme that prioritised implementing austerity measures and raising the employment rate, and it did not include

any gender equality measures. Perhaps surprisingly, the labour market organisations took a proactive role in raising the reform to the agenda as a question of improving gender equality in the labour market. However, many key actors focused on public finances. Eventually, the reform was raised to the government agenda with strict framework conditions: the family leaves should be reformed with the aim of raising employment rates and without any increases in public spending.

Compared to earlier corporatist policy processes around gender equality and family leave, labour market organisations were given less leeway in the negotiation, as the government not only set the strict framework conditions but also took charge of steering this politically difficult reform. These strict conditions reflecting the neoliberal austerity paradigm sidelined and narrowed the gender equality goals. In practice, this excluded measures that would most effectively ensure equal division of care responsibilities in a family-friendly way by extending paid parental leave to increase fathers' quota. Furthermore, during the negotiations, it became evident that the only model that would satisfy the strict conditions would cut the benefits commonly used by mothers, especially less-educated mothers in precarious labour market positions.

After half a year of heated negotiations, the Centre Party minister responsible for the reform unilaterally halted the policymaking process. Although negotiations had been difficult, the decision to use its veto surprised and disappointed the other parties. Stalling the reform could also be interpreted as the government using its power instead of waiting for and accepting the result of negotiations reached by the labour market organisations. A cutting model was perceived as politically difficult to implement by the Centre and Populist Parties, as well as some trade unions. On the other hand, the cutting model would have served the interests of certain actors, especially the right-wing parties, as well as the employers and business-interest organisations, given their unwillingness to increase social security contributions.

Overall, the failed reform showcased the government's aim of disrupting the corporatist tradition and pushing labour market organisations, especially trade unions, to a more consultative role. The employer and business-interest organisations seemed to have better connections to the government, as their interests aligned with the neoliberal agenda. Although gender equality initiatives have often been diluted in corporatist policy processes, this time sidelining those organisations and the tighter steering of the government did not produce a long-awaited reform or make its adoption easier. The no-cost and workfare approach sidelined gender equality and eventually the power struggles between key actors led to the stalling of the reform.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have explored the characteristics of Finnish corporatism and its implications for gender equality. In addition, we aimed to evaluate whether Finnish corporatism is changing and whether this change is positive or negative from the perspective of gender equality. For these purposes, we coin the term *reconfigured corporatism*, which refers to changing practices and power relations in Finnish corporatism, both at peak and routine.

Since the global economic crisis in 2008, institutional structures of collective bargaining and corporatist political processes have become increasingly contested in Europe, subject to deliberate interventions with the aim of decentralisation, liberalisation and pushing social partners towards a more consultative role in policy processes. However, it has been argued that at times of financial crisis, states call for social partners to negotiate pacts and externalise policymaking to social partners. By doing so, they aim to reduce the burden on government expenses during the economic crisis, thus reducing the need for major structural reforms (e.g. Bergström & Styhre, in press). The



role of the state during crises has been perceived as active in the implementation of austerity and decentralisation (Howell, 2021). We argue that this externalisation and decentralisation are also visible in the reluctance of the government to push forward wage policies that could promote gender equality, even during the COVID-19 crisis, which made the value of feminised work visible in an unprecedented way.

Although the Nordic model of employment relations has maintained stability even during the economic crisis, the Finnish labour market was faced with similar neoliberal pressures for change, liberalisation and decentralisation and ideas on the necessity of internal devaluation to restore the national economy, as most European countries did quite shortly after the crisis. Indeed, one obvious reconfiguration in Finnish corporatism is the trend of decentralisation, gradually moving from centralised collective bargaining to sectoral bargaining and even local, company-level bargaining.

The typical argument is that centralised models of collective bargaining are beneficial for gender equality. However, in Finland, where collective bargaining has traditionally been centralised, the gender pay gap is wider than the EU average. Historical gender inequalities and the undervaluation of feminised work have been found to be institutionalised within collective agreements, which often gave unwarranted legitimacy for unequal pay practices (e.g. Koskinen Sandberg et al., 2018). While this is true, decentralisation does not mean an increased level of gender equality, including equal pay, just more variation in bargaining practices, pay practices and conditions of work in both directions. The current sectoral bargaining model and emphasis on export industry-driven wage bargaining freeze the pay gap between the male-dominated export industries and the feminised public sector. There are, however, also good examples of how wage increases have been obtained

at the local level as a combination of civil society activism and local bargaining, despite national collective agreements with lower wage levels (Case 3).

In Finland, governments are reluctant to interfere with labour market questions, leaving them for social partners to resolve. The state has attempted to avoid responsibility for gender equality, especially equal pay, by outsourcing the question to the labour market parties (Saari, 2016). There are some recent examples of state interventions in labour market issues, also discussed in this chapter: the case of wage increases for nurses and related industrial action just before the 2008 economic crisis (Saari et al., 2021; Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019) and the Competitiveness Pact that lowered labour costs (Case 1). Both cases have a certain level of notoriety and act as justifications for governments not interfering in labour market questions. This evading responsibility is also present in the case of COVID-19 bonuses for healthcare staff, which the government left to be resolved at the local level.

The Finnish labour market has structural problems linked to high levels of gender segregation and the undervaluation of feminised work. This inequality has led to increasing dissatisfaction among the public sector labour force, exemplified by nurses' constant claims for wage increases and equal pay, and the wage cartel on early education teachers' wages and the wage increases that followed the exposure of such ill treatment of these employees. The public sector has also faced weakening working conditions in the form of austerity, cuts and outsourcing. There has been turmoil in the feminised local government sector. One example is the case of the NoPlayMoney social movement (Case 3). Its significance is in the fact that wage increases were obtained immediately after the collective bargaining round, which did not produce these increases, had ended and during a time when the Competitiveness Pact that aimed to cut labour costs was still in effect. The fact that an

outside actor could interfere put the trade unions representing early education in an awkward position.

In tripartite policy formulation, state officials are increasingly frustrated with the social partners that have so far often been able to stall or water down important policy measures. Thus, in some recent cases, such as the parental leave reform and pay transparency legislation, social partners are given less power over policy formulation and are given a more consultative role instead. Time will tell whether this will be a permanent change in Finnish corporatism or a link to recent governments.

While there is indeed a change in Finnish corporatism, there is also remarkable stability and continuity. Social partners are still an important part of policy formulation. Moreover, while moving towards local bargaining seems to be an objective shared by many actors in Finnish society, somehow strong coordination emerges in collective bargaining during collective bargaining rounds that are officially supposed to be at the union level. Finland's export industry-driven model is also an example of coordination, not decentralisation. The public sector is not free to bargain wage increases greater than those obtained by the export industries.

Finally, as mentioned before, decentralisation can pose risks for gender equality, as it leaves more discretion at the local level and fewer tools to implement labour market-wide gender equality policies. However, we also argue that more traditional Finnish corporatism has not been purely beneficial for gender equality either. It has maintained the status quo and many gendered hierarchies and inequalities within the labour market. Thus, we do not see reconfigurations as purely negative. The reconfiguration in the power balance between the government and the social partners can potentially also mean a more progressive and effective gender equality policy to be implemented in the future.

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