

Wage politics and feminist solidarity

The case of a cartel regarding early education teachers' wages in the Finnish capital area

Paula Koskinen Sandberg 

Tampere University, Gender Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere, Finland

Correspondence

Paula Koskinen Sandberg, Tampere University, Gender Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere, Finland.
Email: paula.koskinen-sandberg@tuni.fi

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Abstract

This article explores a case of feminist solidarity and wage politics—namely, a social movement claiming equal pay for early education teachers. 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 labor. The revelation resulted in public outrage and the rise of the No Play Money social movement that demanded higher wages for early education teachers. The driving force for the mobilization was feminist solidarity, which resulted in collective resistance toward gendered labor market practices and, ultimately, higher wages. For an institutionalized practice to change, the legitimacy of the practice must be convincingly questioned, and this requires actors who problematize previous ways of understanding the issue. This was achieved in the present case through wage politics; the politicization and contestation of mainstream conceptualizations of wage formation and appropriate wage levels for feminized work.

KEYWORDS

collective bargaining, feminist solidarity, gender pay gap, social movement, wage politics

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Cities of the capital region have a gentlemen's agreement on not rising early education teachers' wages.—“I call this a wage cartel”. (Headline in Finnish media, March 2018)

Patriarchal practices and institutions, including discriminatory labor market practices, have become increasingly contested and have met resistance. Demonstrations and strikes have been organized in several countries to claim equal pay and to protest the gender pay gap (e.g., Brewer, 2015; Henley, 2019; Livingston, 2018). Axes of mobilization are shifting, and claims for equal pay are increasingly made by non-union social movements (e.g., Piore & Safford, 2006). This phenomenon can be conceptualized as *wage politics*—that is, contestation over wage formation (and the processes involved in it), justified wage levels, and the gender pay gap. Engaging in wage politics entails challenging the taken-for-granted, mainstream understandings of wages and offering an alternative explanation for existing, established wage levels. Online platforms and social media have made these collective efforts easier, allowing efficient and impactful feminist organization and mobilization (e.g., Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019).

This article explores a case of feminist solidarity and wage politics—namely, a social movement called NoPlayMoney (*Eileikkirahaa* in Finnish) that challenges established labor market institutions and practices with the specific feminist agenda of lifting feminized work from the wage pothole. The events in question unfolded around early education teachers' wages in the Finnish local government sector. In March 2018, the Finnish media revealed that several municipalities in the Finnish capital area had reached a secret agreement—a “wage cartel”—concerning early education teachers' wages. These municipalities had agreed not to compete with each other through wage increases for early education teachers. At the same time, there was a severe shortage of labor in this sector, with around 600 unfilled positions. The Finnish labor market remains highly gender-segregated, and feminized work tends to be significantly lower paid. Early education teachers are one example of such an undervalued feminized occupational group (e.g., Grönlund, Halldén, & Magnusson, 2017; Koskinen Sandberg, Törnroos, & Kohvakka, 2018).

The revelation made by the media resulted in public outrage and the rise of NoPlayMoney. The social movement, initiated on social media by a woman who was both a mother and an entrepreneur, mobilized thousands of people in just a few days. A particularly interesting feature of this case is that wage increases for early education teachers were demanded by citizens outside the field of early education, not just early education teachers themselves or the unions representing them. People taking part in collective resistance against this unjust, gendered labor market practice included the author of this article: a feminist academic and an active participant in the social movement from day one.

The aim of this article is two-fold: to analyze the institutional setting that has maintained low wages for feminized work in the Finnish local government sector and to analyze how these institutions and existing wage levels became contested via the work of the NoPlayMoney social movement. The NoPlayMoney social movement serves as an example of how gendered institutionalized labor market practices can be challenged by an outside actor through feminist solidarity and resistance (e.g., Elomäki, Kantola, Koivunen, & Ylöstalo, 2019; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019). In the present analysis, I utilize the concept of institutional work (e.g., T. Lawrence et al., 2011) and analyze how disruptive institutional work (T. B. Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006) was conducted through the politicization of existing wage levels in order to achieve higher wages for early education teachers. Institutional work represents action directed towards “creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions.” This article focuses mainly on disruptive institutional work, though also utilized is the concept of defensive institutional work (Maguire & Hardy, 2009), which denotes a situation where traditional actors react to contestations by defending existing practices. I do not claim that total institutional change was achieved or that institutional practices collapsed. They did not. However, change was achieved in the form of higher wages, which is significant and highly unusual given that gendered labor market practices and institutions (e.g. collective agreements and the pay practices included in them) are typically highly resistant to change (Saari, Kantola, & Koskinen Sandberg, in press, Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019).

The data used in building the analysis were media articles from 2018 about the case ($N = 133$), interviews of central actors ($N = 11$), and field notes and observations collected by the author during 2018. Methods used in this article combine participatory action research (e.g., Whyte, 1991; for accounts of feminist action research and activism, see Acker, 1991; Austen, Jefferson, & Preston, 2013; Elomäki et al., 2019) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyze both the events that took place and institutional work conducted in relation to the value of feminized work and related labor market and pay practices. The central questions guiding this research are as follows: what kind of institutionalized practices upheld the legitimacy of paying low wages for feminized occupations of the public sector, and what kind of institutional work was directed against these gendered, institutionalized practices, with what kind of results?

This article contributes to the literature on equal pay by bringing together literature on employment relations, wage determination practices, institutional work, and feminist solidarity and resistance. Doing so enables a conceptualization of wage politics around undervalued, feminized work and the mechanisms through which these institutionalized practices became questioned and change took place. This article also makes an empirical contribution by analyzing how the renegotiation and redefining of the value of work can be reinforced through feminist activism and engagement in wage politics. The case of the wage cartel made clear how—contrary to often-expressed beliefs and arguments in, for example, mainstream economics (for classics, see Becker, 1994; Mincer, 1958; for differences between mainstream and heterodox approaches, see S. E. Austen et al., 2013)—wages are based not just on market forces, supply and demand, or individuals making investments in their human capital. Nor are wages based only on job demands and performance, as HRM research often assumes (e.g., Gerhart & Rynes, 2003; Heneman, 2003; see also Koskinen Sandberg, 2017 for a critique). The case in question shows how low wages can be based on gendered institutionalized practices that are maintained and reinforced by central actors, such as labor market institutions and the local authorities who serve as employers (e.g., Grimshaw & Rubery, 2007; Hampson & Junor, 2015).

2 | THE GENDER PAY GAP, WAGE POLITICS, AND THE LEGITIMACY OF LOW PAY FOR FEMINIZED WORK

The question of low pay for early education teachers is part of a broader question of undervaluation of feminized work and the resulting gender pay gap. The gender pay gap, which in Finland currently stands at 16.2 percent (Official Statistics of Finland), is commonly attributed to gender segregation in the labor market—that is, women and men working in different sectors and occupations. Mainstream economics presents wages as determined by market forces and reflecting productivity and investments in human capital made by individuals. These views—which have become widely accepted, taken-for-granted explanations of what wages are—hide the underlying dynamics of the gender pay gap (Koskinen Sandberg, 2018). This section elaborates on the key dynamics behind the gender pay gap in Finland and the key points of contestation. In my earlier work (Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019), I have conceptualized wages as being shaped by political processes, negotiations, power relations, and the vested interests of central stakeholders within the macro-economic and political framework. The case of the wage cartel and the NoPlayMoney social movement offers an interesting empirical example of how a civil society actor can successfully engage in wage politics.

2.1 | Undervaluation of feminized reproductive work

Early education teachers are among the feminized, undervalued, and low-paid occupations of the Finnish local government sector. These feminized occupations have a specific history that influences how they have been viewed and how their wages have developed over time (Saari et al., in press). The Finnish welfare state expanded during the

1960s and 1970s. The women's employment rate in Finland grew simultaneously with the welfare state. Women typically found employment within the welfare state, which employed them 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, institutionalized in Finnish legislation and collective agreements, 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 feminized occupations within the welfare state, such as nurses and early education teachers, came to reflect this institutionalized practice. The low wage levels had been institutionalized within the Finnish collective bargaining system (Koskinen Sandberg et al., 2018), which provided legitimacy for discriminatory wage determination practices.

Over the years, the qualification requirements and job demands of early education teachers have increased, but wages have not followed suit. Currently, early education teachers are required to have bachelor's degrees and have increasing pedagogical responsibilities based on reformed legislation on early education in Finland (540/2018). Still, by Finnish standards, their wages are very low. In 2017, the average monthly wage for early education teachers was €2607 (Local Government Employers, 2019), while the average wage for all employees in the Finnish labor market was €3392 (Official Statistics of Finland).

2.2 | Mainstream economics' understanding of wages and the gender pay gap

The low wages of early education teachers has been a topic of ongoing discussion in Finland for decades, and there was industrial action regarding it in the 1980s (e.g., Åsvik, 1999). Despite this action, the practices of wage determination and the resulting low wage level have not been strongly problematized (e.g., in comparison to nurses' wages) (Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019; Saari et al., in press). The NoPlayMoney social movement is the first large-scale, non-union mobilization around the question of wages in early education. There are many reasons for this. One is the cultural acceptance and taken-for-grantedness of lower wage levels for women and feminized reproductive work. Another contemporary aspect typical of the Finnish public debate is the mainstream economics discourse around wages (see also Eskelinen & Jonker-Hoffrén, 2017). There are a handful of (male) economists who have gained the authority to explain how the economy and labor market, including wage formation, function (e.g., Eskelinen & Jonker-Hoffrén, 2017).

The main arguments used by representatives of the economics profession are that wages are shaped by market forces—that is, they reflect individual productivity and investments in human capital—and that gender segregation of the labor market explains the gender pay gap (classics include Mincer, 1958; Becker, 1994; for differences between neoclassical and heterodox economics, see S. E. Austen et al., 2013). Thus, in the Finnish public debate, there is a strong resonance with the conceptualization of wages found in mainstream economics. These views claiming that the gender pay gap is the result of women choosing low-paying jobs (e.g., Mäki-Lohiluoma, 2017) or that the gender pay gap disappears when comparing pay rates within similar jobs (e.g., Talouselämä, 2016) used to be the standard way in which the mainstream media portrayed wage inequality in Finland. The Finnish media also has provided a platform for anti-feminist activists who claim that the gender pay gap does not exist (e.g., Sumanen, 2010). These arguments can also be found in positions published by employer organizations, which shift the responsibility for unequal wages from employers to employees. A good example of this is a column written by an expert from the Confederation of Finnish Industries titled “A woman's euro is 97 cents” (Marttila, 2015), which reduces wage inequality to only within-job differences and purposefully ignores the bigger picture of wage inequality. The role of such central actors and institutions as trade unions, employer organizations, and the state in wage formation has typically been ignored and downplayed. The emphasis has been on individuals and their choices and motives (e.g., Arnsperger & Varoufakis, 2006; see also; S. E. Austen et al., 2013) rather than on the social structures that pre-exist these choices and the conditions they place on individual citizens.

As a feminist scholar studying equal pay, the gendered labor market, and Finnish industrial relations, I have contributed to offering an alternative perspective to the debate on wages and equal pay in Finland, emphasizing the role of political decision-making, institutional actors, gendered social practices, and historical developments in shaping wage outcomes (see also Acker, 1989; S. E. Austen et al., 2013). This different viewpoint is based on my scholarly work (e.g., Koskinen Sandberg et al., 2018; Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019), but it is also presented in Finnish media, where I have frequently appeared. Although my own work is not solely responsible, I have contributed to the problematization of the mainstream media debate and changed the direction of the debate to some extent. In the Finnish public debate on equal pay and wages, the mainstream economics perspective is still present, but now so too is the feminist political and sociological perspective.

2.3 | Finnish labor market institutions

To study institutionalized practices, resistance, and change, it is important to take a closer look at the institutions that are central to this case. In this article, the Finnish corporatist actors (i.e., trade unions, employer organizations, and the government) are viewed as central institutional actors with the power to shape wages. Collective bargaining processes and the resulting collective agreements are viewed as institutions that uphold and legitimize gendered wage determination practices. Local governments participate in legitimizing low pay for feminized work through the implementation of national collective agreements and through their local pay practices.

The Finnish collective bargaining system has traditionally been centralized, although it is currently moving toward a more local, industry level (Jonker-Hoffrén, 2019). Between 1968 and 2008, wage increases were negotiated for the entire Finnish labor market in the Incomes Policy Agreements, which were negotiated between central labor market organizations (trade union confederations and employer organizations) and the state (e.g., Jonker-Hoffrén, 2019). Centralized collective bargaining has contributed to rather stable wage relativities between different industries. It has also maintained the gendered hierarchies of the labor market—for instance, between the public and private sectors and between female- and male-dominated jobs and industries—established during earlier decades (e.g., Koskinen Sandberg, 2018). In the relatively centralized and stable industrial relations system, altering established and institutionalized pay practices and wage relativities is a challenging task.

In addition to the big picture of collective bargaining and labor market institutions in Finland, the local government has its own peculiarities. In Finland, the local government sector is a large employer with more than 400,000 employees, 80 percent of whom are women. The sector covers a variety of tasks and employs people in a variety of jobs. The sector also has five major collective agreements with different wage levels and different wage determination practices: General, Technical Sector, Education, Physicians', and Hourly Workers' Collective Agreements (CA's) (e.g., Koskinen Sandberg et al., 2018). Of these, the General Collective Agreement is the largest, and it covers most of the undervalued, feminized reproductive work within the sector, including early education teachers. These collective agreements are negotiated between local government employers and many different trade unions and negotiation organs, each representing different interests. Recently, after the 2020 collective bargaining round, it was agreed that early education teachers will be relocated to Education CA as of Fall 2021. Health care will also leave General CA for new collective agreement that will be established (OAJ, 2020, TEHY, 2020). The unions representing these occupational groups are long-term rivals, and they each hope that changes to their collective their collective agreements will result in improved wage development for their members, both of which are undervalued feminized occupational groups (Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019, Saari et al., in press).

The written collective agreements state that wages are based on job demands and performance, but this study, as well as earlier scholarship, shows that this is not the case (e.g., Koskinen Sandberg et al., 2018). Wages in the sector develop in each collective bargaining round based on money allocated to the local government by the state, which forms the basis for wage levels and increases. There are historical developments, described earlier in this article, that established the low wage level for feminized public sector work in Finland.

Having separate wage determination practices and collective agreements for different employee groups has also been common in other national contexts. For instance, before harmonizing wage determination practices as part of the Single Status Agreement, the UK local government sector had several collective agreements with varying pay practices. Harmonizing these systems uncovered the undervaluation of feminized work, a situation very similar to the one still in place in Finland (e.g., Conley, 2014). Care work and service sector occupations have also been revealed as undervalued in Australia (e.g., S. E. Austen et al., 2013; S. Austen & Jefferson, 2015), although in this context the jobs are in the private service sector rather than the local government sector. There the low wage level was successfully contested in court, resulting in wage increases for these feminized groups. This kind of contestation over wage level (i.e., wage politics) has yet to occur in Finland.

3 | METHODOLOGY AND DATA: ANALYZING INSTITUTIONAL WORK AND FEMINIST ACTIVISM

This article analyzes feminist resistance and mobilization against patriarchal labor market institutions and the unfair, institutionalized wage determination practices these have brought upon feminized work in the Finnish local government sector (e.g., Koskinen Sandberg et al., 2018). Institutions can be defined as historical accumulations of practices and understandings of a phenomenon (e.g., Scott, 2013). They have acquired the status of facts that are taken-for-granted, and they shape the conditions for future activities and action. Institutions can also be viewed as gendered as they reflect, reinforce, and structure unequal power relations in societies (e.g., Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Waylen, 2014).

Studying the objectives and strategies of social movements offers insight into the nature of domination in societies. Social movements target institutions, both state and non-state, with claims for societal change (e.g., Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008). Social movements are collectivities that act outside of institutional channels for the purpose of challenging or defending existing institutions (Snow, 2004). For analytic purposes, this article utilizes the concept of *institutional work*. Institutional work denotes action directed towards “creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions” (T. Lawrence et al., 2011). This article focuses both on disruptive institutional work (e.g., T. Lawrence et al., 2011), which challenges established institutions and aims at disrupting them, and on defensive institutional work (Maguire & Hardy, 2009), which aims at upholding and defending existing institutions through different tactics.

The data used in this article consists of three elements: interviews, media data, and research notes that I collected during 2018. All three types of data are utilized in the case description, and media data and interviews are used in the actual analysis. First, I utilized data produced through what can be roughly described as participatory action research (e.g., see Whyte, 1991; for accounts of feminist action research and activism, see Acker, 1989; S. E. Austen et al., 2013; Elomäki et al., 2019), which involves my own field notes, reflections, and actions in 2018 as a feminist scholar and as a participant in the social movement. I have taken notes, with the specific intention of using them in my research, on the activities and events covering the first year of the NoPlayMoney social movement and actively followed the discussions in the NoPlayMoney Facebook group throughout 2018 and beyond. The discussions are not analyzed as data in this article, but they informed my analysis of the case through my collected notes. The main function of the research notes was to help me remember the events correctly—that is, what happened and when and who did what. The research notes both helped me in building the case description and in thinking about what is interesting about this case and whom I should interview.

Second, I utilized media data consisting of 133 news articles about the NoPlayMoney social movement published in Finnish print and online media during 2018. Together with another activist of the social movement, I collected media reporting on the movement's activities in 2018; the data is thus extensive. For analysis of the data, I use thematic analysis (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006). I analyzed the data by reading the material carefully and identifying the chronology of the unfolding events (for case description) and the central themes and topics of the

articles, which I then compiled in an Excel spreadsheet for further analysis. There were many emerging central themes, including the wage cartel, pay systems, the labor shortage, problems in early education, the value of work, the demands for a living wage, collective bargaining, activism, demonstrations, and, ultimately, pay raises. The sources from which the quotes were obtained are not listed in my references to maintain the anonymity of the interviewees since, in many cases, my interviewees are named in the news articles. Media material is cited by using the time interval of when the article was published—for example, “Media May 2018.” Details on media data are listed in Appendix 1.

Third, I interviewed parties ($N = 11$) that I identified as central actors in this case. The interviews allowed me to delve deeper into the central topics of the case. The interviewees were from the following groups: the NoPlay-Money social movement ($N = 3$); media ($N = 1$); employer organization ($N = 2$); trade unions A, B, and C related to the case (two informants from Trade Union A) ($N = 4$); and an HR manager from one of the wage cartel cities ($N = 1$). The interviewees were chosen based on their central role in the events under investigation here—for example, the interviewees from labor market organizations held leadership positions or were directly linked to collective bargaining and the promotion of early education teachers' interests. The journalist was central in exposing the wage cartel. Some potential informants refused to be interviewed—namely, the HR managers from the other two wage cartel cities. Within the social movement, there were other possibilities for interviewees. I chose the person who established the social movement, the person that organized the first demonstration, and the person who became the leader and main representative of the movement in 2018. The involvement of other activists is represented in the analysis through my action research and the notes I took. The analysis of this data and the media data are similar: I analyzed the data by reading the transcriptions carefully and identifying responses to central themes and topics in the interviews, all of which I then compiled in an Excel spreadsheet for further analysis. The central themes, on which my interview questions also focused, included reasons behind the low wage level in early education, the industrial relations system, the matter of how wages are determined, who has responsibility for wages, and how central actors view activism concerning the wage question. These themes were informed by the topics I chose for the interviews based on media data and my personal reflections and notes on the case. The interviews allowed me to explore these topics in more detail from the perspective of different actors. The interviews—semi-structured and 40–90 min in length—were all on similar topics, but the interview questions were personalized to some extent to match the role and context of the informant in question. The quotes have been translated from Finnish to English and slightly summarized and edited for clarity while making an effort to sustain the original tone and meaning.

3.1 | On my involvement as a researcher and activist

My own interest in the Finnish industrial relations system and the undervaluation of feminized work goes back years and predates my involvement in the case under investigation. Prior to my academic career, I have worked in a trade union, as a government official in a gender equality agency, and on several action research projects where the objective has been to improve gender equality within organizations. My interests ultimately led me to become a researcher. I am still keen on making a societal impact, which is the main reason for my involvement in the social movement.

My dual role as an academic and an activist has some implications for this research. As an academic, my position differs from that of most other actors (e.g., labor representatives or people working in early education themselves). While I was actively involved in the NoPlayMoney movement, my perspective was largely that of an outside observer and analyst. This perspective, combined with a broad knowledge of the topic gained through both my research and the positions I held prior to becoming an academic, enabled me to observe the events from a unique perspective. All of the people I interviewed knew that I was an academic, and all of them were informed about my participation in the social movement. They were also informed, however, that the material I was gathering

was to be used purely for research purposes. Most of the participants took the involvement and interest of an academic very positively, as Finnish academics had at that point not typically shown interest either in the local government sector collective bargaining process or in wages in early education. Thus, most interviewees spoke very openly and enthusiastically in interview situations. One of the interviewees, from an employer organization, remained somewhat reserved during the interview but still offered plenty of valuable information on the case.

While there are some ethical considerations that arise from my playing a dual role in the case, it is not uncommon for feminist researchers to also be activists and personally involved in their objects of study (e.g., see Acker, 1989; S. E. Austen et al., 2013; Elomäki et al., 2019; Lund, 2015; Ylöstalo, 2020). The analytical considerations of personal involvement are related to in-depth knowledge and understanding about the case, which is a strength. While some ideals of science consider objectivity central, I adopt the view that value-free research is impossible. One's own life experiences and interests always impact the topics one chooses to study and the approaches one takes. The best policy is to be open and honest about these interests and reflect on their implications, as I have done in this article.

4 | THE CASE: THE WAGE CARTEL AND THE NOPLAYMONEY SOCIAL MOVEMENT

In early 2018, the Finnish media revealed that three cities in the Finnish capital area—Helsinki, Espoo, and Vantaa—had made a secret agreement to not compete with each other by offering early education teachers higher wages (Media March, 2018). A journalist, whom I interviewed, stumbled upon the scheme while doing background work for another story on early education (Interview of Journalist). Several people told her about the wage cartel. The claim that such a cartel existed had also been made repeatedly in online discussions on different platforms. The journalist then started to investigate the topic, first calling a trade union representative (Trade Union A2 in these data). The representative was hesitant but then confirmed that he had been present in several meetings where this topic had been discussed; however, he could not be the one leaking the information, as it would damage the collaboration with Trade Union A's negotiation partners. However, if the journalist could get the information elsewhere, he would then confirm it (Interview of Journalist). The journalist then called the managers in the three cities, two of whom openly admitted to the agreement, while the third phrased it as “following wage development within the region.” The managers later tried to recant, claiming that they had used an unfortunate choice of words denoting the “gentlemen's agreement” (Media March, 2018). The journalist also mentioned that since she had collaborated with Trade Union A on the story, the trade union had the news article several days before the story was made public and was able to prepare their media strategy. Thus, they came out as utterly surprised and shocked about the news, even though they had known about the wage cartel for years.

Trade Union A accuses capital area cities of suppressing wages of early education teachers. Outrageous attack on teaching as a field, and illegal. (Headline in Media March 2018)

The revelation, labeled a “wage cartel” (by Trade Union A) and a “gentlemen's agreement” (by one of the HR managers of the wage cartel cities), resulted in public outrage (several media outlets in March 2018 interviewed Activists 1, 2, and 3). In many ways, it went against everything commonly thought about how wages are determined and how labor markets work. The case under investigation challenged the understanding of wages and labor market dynamics in many important ways. It became clear that market forces do not determine wages in welfare state employment. Instead, there were actors who had deliberately kept 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 (Media March, 2018) and trade unions seemingly appalled by the revelation (Media March, 2018). Employer organizations initially remained silent but later announced that they had investigated the issue and that there was

no wage cartel (Media April, 2018). Meanwhile, on social media (e.g., Twitter) and elsewhere, economists condemned the cartel as harmfully interfering with the market economy (Media March, 2018). In addition to more traditional actors (e.g., the media, trade unions, employer organizations, politicians, and researchers and other experts), new subject positions also emerged. Among those who were angry were ordinary citizens who wanted to do something concrete to change the situation (several media outlets in March 2018, Interviews Activists 1, 2, and 3). This is an exemplary case of feminist solidarity.

4.1 | The rise of the social movement

Social media platforms have been helpful for feminist organizing in several cases (e.g., Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019). In the days following the news of the wage cartel, Activist 1 started a Facebook group that set improving wages of early education teachers as a target (Interview of Activist 1, Media March, 2018). In Activist 1's social media channels, she noticed that people who are typically not socially active were enraged over the wage cartel. That was a sign that it must be something significant. The wage cartel provoked negative emotions, as people had deep, shared feelings of injustice and wanted to do something about it (Interview of Activist 1). Every successful campaign needs an objective that resonates beyond the immediate actors (Prowse, Lopes, & Fells, 2017), and fighting the wage cartel is a good example of such a case. Subsequently, the Facebook group came to be known as the NoPlayMoney social movement. In March of 2018, right after launching the social media group, Activist 1 openly claimed in an interview with one of Finland's major media outlets that she wished to test the power of social media in this case. Thousands of people joined the group in just a couple of days and began to self-organize. These people included Activist 2, Activist 3, and the present author. In the early days of the movement, the emotional response to the wage cartel revelation was enormous; it brought people together, and it was effectively mobilized towards activity that targeted the institutions responsible for the events. There were skilled and creative people involved, and logos, slogans, memes, and social media channels started to appear (Interviews of Activists 1, 2, and 3).

Many of the key activists, including Activist 1, the author of this article, and many others, were openly feminist, and it was an openly stated aim of the social movement to improve the wage level of low-paid, feminized occupational groups in Finland (this was NoPlayMoney's stated aim on the group's Facebook page). Clearly this is a feminist aim that goes beyond the ill treatment of one occupational group. The social movement did, however, appeal to people with a variety of backgrounds, some emphasizing feminist goals and gender equality and some putting more emphasis on quality and working conditions within early education.

Prior to the wage cartel revelation, my own research concerned the collective bargaining system and the undervaluation of work conducted by women in the Finnish public sector. One of my case studies (Koskinen Sandberg et al., 2018) was the early education sector, and I had frequently discussed the topic in the Finnish media. I was very excited when I saw the wage cartel story and discussed it actively on social media, as I saw a momentum for wage increases. When I noticed the Facebook group started by Activist 1, I joined immediately. I wanted to be a part of it, whatever it would eventually become.

4.2 | Strategies and achievements of the social movement

NoPlayMoney used a combination of traditional and innovative means to claim higher wages for early education teachers. In March and April of 2018, it held two demonstrations in which trade unions participated and politicians spoke (Media March and April 2018 Interviews of Activists 1, 2, and 3 and Interviews of Trade Union A1, Trade Union A2, Trade Union B, and Trade Union C). But there was also a so-called *Ask for a Pay Raised 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 (Media April 2018, Interviews of Activists 1, 2, and 3). The ready-to-use requests were prepared by the activists. The social movement has collaborated with the trade unions but is not a part of any of them, while trade unions have sponsored the social movement with small amounts of money. In addition, the social movement has used crowdfunding to collect money for activities through Activist 1's platform. Most of the activities have been based on volunteer work. At its largest, there were 18,000 members in the Facebook group.

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 (Media January 2019). The first positive news came from the city of Vantaa, which gave a €145 raise (Media June 2018). Helsinki gave a €175 raise, which amounted to a 7.4 percent increase in pay and was a historic result (Interview of Activist 3). In 2020, Helsinki gave an additional raise of €46, which put the total wage increase to €221 (Media December, 2019). A third of the municipalities in Finland are considering similar raises, and some have already decided (Media January, 2019).

In terms of percentages, these raises are quite substantial, but the wages remain low in absolute terms and are significantly less than the €3000 that was set as a target. The average monthly income for an early education teacher was €2663 in October 2018 (Local Government Employers), after which some cities gave raises. The average monthly income in Finland in 2018 was €3458, with women earning €3160 on average and men earning €3761 (Official Statistics of Finland, 2019).

4.3 | Tensions between the social movement and traditional actors

The case of the NoPlayMoney social movement is fascinating since the social movement managed to disrupt established labor market institutions and to facilitate changes that the trade unions had been unsuccessful in negotiating by themselves, this despite claiming to have done "the best they could" (Interviews of Activist 3 and Trade Union A1). The NoPlayMoney movement has been a somewhat controversial actor from the perspective of those trade unions negotiating collective agreements, particularly Trade Union A. On the one hand, there has been collaboration and genuine gratitude for the extensive support for early education teachers' wage claims (e.g., Interviews of Trade Unions A2, Trade Union B, and Trade Union C). On the other hand, Trade Union A in particular has been reluctant to acknowledge the role the social movement has had in achieving pay raises (e.g., Interviews of Trade Union A1, Trade Union C). In their organizational activities, such as in training for shop stewards, they have candidly spoken out on the historic pay raise that was achieved because of the NoPlayMoney social movement (Interview of Activist 3), but otherwise they have claimed the pay raises resulted from their own work (e.g., Interview Trade Union A1, Media November 2018). Despite their shared interests, NoPlayMoney also posed a strategic challenge to the trade unions since the latter were supposed to take care of collective bargaining and adequate wage levels in the field.

5 | ANALYZING THE WAGE CARTEL, ITS GENDERED INSTITUTIONAL SETTING, AND POSSIBILITIES FOR FEMINIST RESISTANCE

In this section, I move from describing the case to a more detailed analysis of the central actors' views on wages in early education. I thematically analyze the wage politics around early education teachers' wages, including the role of central and new actors, the taken-for-granted mainstream understandings of wages, and the politicization and contestation of wages that took place in this case through feminist solidarity and resistance. The wage cartel case revealed how wages in early education are not based on the grounds typically argued, such as job demands, market mechanisms, or productivity. Instead, they are based on patriarchal, institutionalized practices that result in wage

inequality. As the legitimacy of the wage level was undermined, the feminist social movement was able to challenge existing practices and engage in wage politics. Perhaps not that surprisingly, most of the central actors already knew about the problems in local government sector wage determination, even though they typically kept quiet about them.

The analysis reveals that the disruptive institutional work (T. Lawrence et al., 2011)—that is, activities directed to disrupt existing institutions—was mostly conducted by exposing the wage cartel and the role of central actors in major Finnish media and by keeping the topic in the public spotlight for a long time, thus shaking the taken-for-granted understandings of wages and making inequalities visible. Also part of the disruptive institutional work were strong claims for wage increases, which were hard to resist when the case was exposed the way it was. The defensive institutional work (Maguire & Hardy, 2009) was not about actually defending the wage level but about escaping and outsourcing the responsibility to other actors and reclaiming the role and importance of central actors and institutions such as trade unions.

5.1 | The industrial relations system and reasons behind the low wage level

When trying to understand the rationale of the current wage level for early education teachers, it is important to take a closer look at the dynamics, history, and gendered institutional setting of the Finnish labor market and at the role of those central labor market actors who have the power to shape wage relativities. Most of the interviewed central actors had surprisingly similar ideas of the main reason for, and origin of, the low wage level of early education teachers. Most interviewees (e.g., Trade Unions A1, A2, and B; Activists 1, 2, and 3) and many news articles (several media outlets in March 2018) linked it to the occupation being highly feminized or requiring skills that are understood as feminine and to the fact that the occupation has its background in the basic care of children that used to be done by women in the domestic sphere without pay (for undervaluation of feminized work, see S. E. Austen et al., 2013; Koskinen Sandberg et al., 2018). Many (e.g., Trade Unions A1, A2, and C; Activist 1) said that it is not recognized as a part of the Finnish educational system but is viewed as something that anyone can do (for gendered recognition of skills, see Hampson & Junor, 2015; Steinberg, 1990).

Activist 1 thinks that the question of early education teachers' wages is part of a bigger gender equality question within the Finnish labor market and that carework is viewed as unproductive, as something that does not contribute to the economy:

It [the low wage level] is based on history and gender relations. I don't see other reasons for it. We used to think that care comes naturally for women and there is no need to pay that much for women's work. Also, we still tend to think that care work does not bring anything measurable to the economy. (Interview of Activist 1)

Even when the low wage level was not specifically linked to labor market history and gendered labor market institutions (Interviews of Employer Organizations 1 and 2), it was still linked to the history of the local government sector collective bargaining system that was established decades ago, with wages lagging behind ever since (Interview of Trade Union B) or remaining at a “moderate level” (Interview of Employer Organization 2). Interestingly, it was not argued in the interviews or the media data that the work is not worth more than current wages paid or that the wage level would, due to the functioning of market forces, have been the same even without the cartel. Thus, the legitimacy of the low wage level seems to have lost ground already, even if the practice has not been drastically questioned in everyday life and in organizational practices.

The local government sector collective agreements were first formed in the 1970s, and wages have lagged behind ever since. The reason for this is the gender segregation of the labor market and the fact that these are highly feminized occupations. (Interview of Trade Union B)

One might expect the central actors, trade unions, and the employer organization to defend the existing pay practices and perform defensive institutional work, since they have negotiated the collective agreement for this field. Interestingly, this was not the case. Even the employer organization interviewees described the wage level as “moderate” and acknowledged the slow pace in which wages develop in the sector (Interview of Employer Organization 2). The cities accused of the wage cartel, especially Helsinki, readily admitted that the demands of the job had not been evaluated recently and that wage levels do not correspond with job demands (Media March and June 2018).

When trying to understand the current wage level, it is also important to further scrutinize the wage determination practices of the local government sector. Among the most fascinating pieces of data from this study are the central actors telling their views on how wages are determined in the Finnish local government. Contrary to much of the economics scholarship on wages and much of the public debate, market forces are not mentioned at all. Central actors from Trade Unions A, B, and C and the Employer Organization almost solely focus on the collective bargaining process, which is, according to them, where wages are decided. Given the institutions the interviewees represent, this could be expected, but it is still interesting that the argument of supply and demand is absent. Some interviewees saw that wages should react to the market, and a lack of a workforce should therefore impact wages. Interfering with the market mechanism was brought up by Activist 1 and Trade Union A1 in their interviews.

The actions of the cities go against what is typically done in a market economy when there is a shortage of labor. Let's take physicians or social workers as an example; for them, cities are willing to pay above the minimum wage level [set in their collective agreement] (Interview of Trade Union A representative, Media March 2018)

5.2 | How are wages determined and who has the responsibility?

Even though the role of institutions (i.e., the local government sector collective bargaining system) was acknowledged, the Employer Organization in particular argued that collective bargaining only sets the minimum wages or the ‘job pricing’. Actual wages, it was claimed, are decided on at the local level (Interview of Employer Organization 2, Media March 2018). Here, the low level of the job price was admitted, but it was claimed not to be the actual, final wage level. The responsibility for the actual wage outcomes was outsourced to local employers. At the local level, a City HR manager then said that national collective agreements determine wages in local government (Interview of City HR Manager). Some cities also claimed that the wage levels are not something they can decide on locally but something that is resolved in national-level collective bargaining and political decision-making (Media April 2018). These arguments can be understood as defensive institutional work (e.g., T. Lawrence et al., 2011). While the actors here are not defending the wage level as such, they are defending their own actions and role within the institutional setting and putting responsibility on other actors.

In addition to market forces, another typical idea of wage determination is that wages are, or at least should be, based on job demands (e.g., Gerhart & Rynes, 2003; Heneman, 2003). Formally, this is also how it should be within the local government sector wage setting. In practice, this is not the case in Finnish local governments. Job evaluation exists, but its connection to wage outcomes is very vague (see also Koskinen Sandberg, 2017; Koskinen Sandberg et al., 2018). The basic wage level for jobs is negotiated in national-level collective bargaining and results in “job price,” a negotiated minimum wage for jobs written down in collective agreements. Only later is job evaluation supposed to take place, and it is not meant to be done on an individual level but for all early education teachers working for a particular city. It is peculiar how different individual job evaluation systems used in different municipalities all result in a wage level that is the same as the minimum wage in General CA (Media March 2018). This serves as evidence that job evaluation is not conducted, or if it is, it does not impact the wage level. Still, the fact that collective agreements state that wages are based on job demands and that job evaluation is conducted

provides unwarranted legitimacy for unequal pay practices. The gendered institutional setting and the collective agreements hide these inequalities (Koskinen Sandberg, 2017).

The interviews also revealed that, in many cases, no evaluation of job demands had taken place within the past 10 years (Interviews of Trade Union A1 and 2, Media April 2018). Also, both Trade Union A1 and Employer Organization 1 agreed that wages are based not on anything substantial but rather on decades of collective bargaining rounds, which act as gendered institutions maintaining wage inequality.

The wage level in early education is not actually based on anything substantial; there is no logic, just a history of collective bargaining rounds and small wage increases one round after another. (Interview Trade Union A1)

There are interesting contradictions in both the interview data and the media data, as wages are represented as i) decided on in national level collective bargaining and ii) decided on at the local level using job evaluations. In addition, gendered labor market history was mentioned as a central cause. While the Finnish gender equality legislation (Act on Equality between Women and Men, 1986/609, 232/2005, 1329/2014) requires all employers, including local governments, to pay non-discriminatory wages, this does not happen in practice in local governments (Koskinen Sandberg et al., 2018). As explained by City HR, each of the five main collective agreements has its own wage determination practices, which are not harmonized or compared. There is no systematic evaluation of job demands or wage levels between the different collective agreements in the sector (Interview City HR). The lack of comparison upholds the idea that wages are justified, and it also upholds gendered disparities in pay and undervaluation of feminized work within the local government collective agreements.

5.3 | Outcomes of feminist organizing around the early education teachers' wage question

As mentioned in the case description, in early 2019, many local authorities gave early education teachers a pay raise. It is not straightforward to elaborate on the role of feminist solidarity and resistance in achieving change or on which of the activities of the social movement were the most effective. Most of the interviewees (e.g., Activists 1, 2, and 3; Trade Unions A2, B, and C; City HR) thought that activism around early education teachers' wages had either a direct or indirect impact on wage increases by conducting disruptive institutional work (Maguire & Hardy, 2009), adding pressure to negotiations, and facilitating the public debate on the wage question. Also important was that the NoPlayMoney movement utilized the anger and rage that the wage cartel revelation provoked to mobilize many activists and challenged established, gendered labor market practices, including low wage levels. The wage cartel revelation exposed the unfair, discriminatory pay practices and put pressure on exposed labor market organizations and the cities as employers to change their practices. Since the traditional actors were in the public eye, they simply could not avoid reacting somehow (Interviews of City HR and Activist 3). The logical thing to do in order to escape further criticism was to allocate wage increases. The social movement also conducted disruptive institutional work by undermining the legitimacy of the low wage level, which was clearly unfair and unjustified, with no one even actively defending it.

Most of the interviewees viewed activism around the wage question as a positive thing, even though it put the trade unions in an awkward position at times, since defending the interests of early education teachers is their task (Interviews of Trade Unions A2, B, and C; Journalist; City HR; and Employer Organization 2). Trade Union A2 emphasized that the amount of support early education teachers received was like nothing seen before, an example of the strong response provoked by the case. He listed the social movement, journalists, and the author of this article as important supporters and contributors to these unusual events around early education teachers' wages (Interview of Trade Union A2). Based on their experience with feminist activism, the actors from the NoPlayMoney

social movement thought that it was possible to make a difference via activism, although this is not always easy (Activists 1, 2, 3). In the case of the scandalous wage cartel, the momentum for change was there, and the social movement took advantage of that momentum (Activist 1). In this particular case, change was facilitated by feminist activism and resistance.

Some actors also downplayed the importance of the social movement and emphasized that wage negotiations take place between trade unions and employer organizations (Interviews of Trade Union A1 and Employer Organization 1, Media November 2018). Part of this can be interpreted as embarrassment or defensive institutional work (Maguire and Hardy, 2009), especially on the trade unions' part, and as claiming their established position in the wage bargaining process. Although working on the same side and for shared goals, the feminist social movement was viewed as a threat.

Activism can create unrealistic ideas about what the possibilities to influence wages are in reality. Media, especially social media, lives on populism and simple messages. But a social movement does not negotiate on wages. No matter how they organize demonstrations, it does not impact the negotiating table. (Trade Union A1)

What then, ultimately, made the difference in why wages were raised? The interviewees claim that it was a combination of several things: the social movement, traditional actors, media attention, and public debate. The major contribution of the social movement was that it made the wage question visible to the public and continuously drew attention to it (Interviews of City HR, Trade Union A2, and Trade Union C). What made the difference, in this case, was the emergent knowledge in the form of the wage cartel case details, the facts behind the low wage level of early education teachers, and the ensuing feminist resistance, demonstrations, social media discussions, and media attention. It was made visible that existing wage levels are determined not just by the often-mentioned abstract market forces but also by actual, active political and organizational decision-making. When this was paired with the ongoing shortage of labor in the field, the legitimacy of the low wage level did not survive. All this together forced central institutional actors to rethink their positions, and change was achieved.

6 | CONCLUSION

In this article, I analyzed a recent case of feminist solidarity and resistance (e.g., Vachhani & Pullen, 2019) towards gendered labor market practices that cause wage inequality, namely the case of the wage cartel regarding early education teachers' wages in Finland. I focused on the wage politics of the case, institutional work aimed at disrupting or maintaining established practices and institutions, and the role of different central actors relevant to the case, including myself as a feminist scholar and activist. A special focus was on the NoPlayMoney social movement and the impact it had on wage increases that eventually were granted to early education teachers in the Finnish capital region and beyond.

This article makes two major contributions. First, it contributes to the literature on equal pay by bringing together scholarship on employment relations, wage determination practices, institutional work, and feminist solidarity and resistance to conceptualizing wage politics around undervalued, feminized work and the mechanisms through which the undervaluation became questioned and change took place. Second, the article makes an empirical contribution by analyzing how the renegotiation and redefining of the value of work can be reinforced through feminist activism and engagement in wage politics. In this article, wage politics was conceptualized as contestation over wage formation (and the processes involved in it), justified wage levels, and the gender pay gap in order to challenge the taken-for-granted, mainstream understandings of wages and offer an alternative explanation for existing, established wage levels.

Contestation and politicization can be conceptualized as disruptive institutional work (e.g., T. Lawrence et al., 2011) that facilitates change. For institutionalized practices to change, the practices in question need to be successfully challenged (e.g., Maguire & Hardy, 2009). This is what the social movement did through challenging existing, gendered labor market practices, institutions, and established actors in the field. Some established actors responded by reclaiming the centrality of the collective bargaining process for wage determination and downplaying the importance and effectiveness of feminist activism. Interestingly though, none of the actors tried to defend the wage levels for early education teachers as legitimate and fair. The legitimacy of the institutionalized practice had been lost and could no longer be defended. When most cities end up paying the minimum wage listed in the collective agreement, even though they are supposed to use job evaluations for assessing job demands and pay wages that correspond with job demands, it is evident that something is not right. The wage determination practices of the local governments were so clearly flawed and unequal that the three cities had no choice but to raise wages to escape the negative publicity.

The wage cartel clearly went against everything commonly thought about how wages and wage levels are determined and how labor markets work more generally. The wage cartel case challenged the understanding of wages and labor market dynamics in many important ways. It exemplified how 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 and who were now exposed. The case of the wage cartel and the NoPlayMoney social movement serves as an example of a successful case of wage politics and disruptive institutional work conducted by a feminist social movement so as to bring about changes in institutionalized pay practices.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Author elects to not share data.

ORCID

Paula Koskinen Sandberg  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0035-1751>

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Paula Koskinen Sandberg is a Postdoctoral Researcher in Gender Studies in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Tampere University. She has published on topics such as gender relations within the Finnish corporatist regime, gender inequalities in pay systems, the institutionalized undervaluation of women's work, and the social partners' role in drafting gender equality policy and legislation. Her current research interests include gender relations within the changing Nordic welfare state, activism around equal pay, gender impacts of neoliberal economic and labor policies, and corporatist politics.

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APPENDIX 1 Details on media data

	Mar–May 2018	Jun–Aug 2018	Sep–Dec 2018	Total
YLE	21	6	3	29
Helsingin Sanomat	14	5	8	27
MTV3	5	1	5	11
OAJ	5		2	7
Helsingin uutiset	3		3	6
Ilta-lehti	3		1	4
Verkkouutiset	3		1	4
Kansan uutiset	3			3
Aamulehti	3			3
Iltasanomat	1		1	2
Turun Sanomat	1		1	2
Vantaan Uutiset	1		1	2
Keskisuomalainen	2			2
Demokraatti	2			2
Kaleva	1		1	2
Talouselämä	1		1	2
Tamperelainen	1			1
Mustread	1			1
Vihreät	1			1
Länsiväylä	1			1
Vihdin uutiset	1			1
Education international	1			1
Imatralainen	1			1
Politiikasta	1			1
Satakunnan Kansa	1			1
Turkulainen	1			1
Kodin kuvalehti		1		1
Seura		1		1
Opettaja		1		1
Keski-Uusimaa	1			1
Taloussanomien		1		1
Etelä-Saimaa	1			1
Eestinen	1			1
Tiedonantaja	1			1
Kuntatyönantajat	1			1

APPENDIX 1 (Continued)

	Mar-May 2018	Jun-Aug 2018	Sep-Dec 2018	Total
Helsinki city			1	1
Me Naiset			1	1
Kymen Sanomat			1	1
Anna			1	
Jenny +			1	
Total	84	16	33	133