

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

WILEY

# Egalitarian inequality: Gender equality and pattern bargaining

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**Abstract**

This article analyzes the role of the collective wage-setting institution of “pattern bargaining” in maintaining the gendered hierarchies of the labor market and gender pay gap in Norway. The gendered labor market is considered a main cause of the gender pay gap, yet current research and policy has not examined the relation of the gender pay gap to the way sectoral wages are set. Norway is an interesting case because its wage-setting model and gender equality are highly esteemed globally. However, although the wage-setting system in Norway creates an overall more egalitarian wage structure than other advanced industrial countries, it has a built-in gendered inequality that is not part of its current discussion on resolving the gender pay gap. We introduce *egalitarian inequality* to conceptualize this. The article examines the presentation of the gender pay gap in relation to the gendered labor market, and how the pattern bargaining model is presented as both a solution and a hindrance, and which discourse dominates. We analyze the public discourse on the gender pay gap and the pattern-bargaining model, and its interrelations, through the lens of policy advisory commissions appointed by the government, the Norwegian Official Commissions. The findings reveal a dual commitment of upholding both pattern bargaining and gender equality but hardly any willingness to adjust the pattern bargaining model to

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combat the gender pay gap. A clear hierarchy is expressed in which gender equality is subordinate to pattern bargaining.

#### KEYWORDS

collective bargaining, gender, pay gap, public commissions

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Few phenomena are more indicative of the current state of gender equality than the conditions and processes informing the gender pay gap. Certainly, even the most egalitarian countries struggle to put men and women on an even footing at work, partly because the gender pay gap increases upward in the wage dispersion (International Labour Organization, 2019; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017). Particularly pronounced in the Nordic countries – often considered exemplars of emancipation – are gender segregation in the labor market and economic inequality. Studies on how wages are set through institutional coordination have largely ignored the gendered nature of such institutions but have sought to better understand the circumstances and power relations that lead to more egalitarian wage-setting structures in Nordic countries more broadly (Ibsen, 2015; Traxler et al., 2007). A more recent strand of literature focuses on the gendered impact of corporatist interest representation (Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019; Saari et al., 2019), but has not yet examined the specific wage-setting institution of pattern bargaining, which is pivotal to corporatist market structures.

Previous research has shown that both gender-equality policy and pattern bargaining are fundamental ideals in corporatist labor markets such as Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland (Ibsen, 2019; Teigen & Skjeie, 2017). Whilst these countries share the corporatist aspect of how the economy is organized and how collective wages are formed, they are also characterized by a persistent gender pay gap between the sectors. Even though these insights have shown that pattern bargaining leads to an egalitarian wage-setting structure, there have been few discussions on how gendered valuations are embedded in the formal wage determination of pattern bargaining. To address this, we ask: How is the pattern-bargaining model problematized in relation to the persistent gender pay gap? In the discursive representations of these problems, does a friction or a hierarchy emerge? How are the two ideals of pattern bargaining and gender equality reconciled when push comes to shove? These are all parts of an overarching question: How is gendered wage inequality embedded in one of the most egalitarian wage-setting structures in advanced capitalist society? The overall aim of the article is to examine the persistence of the gender pay gap in countries with segregated labor markets in relation to coordinated wage bargaining that traditionally exists in corporatist countries like Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Germany.

In approaching the gendered nature of pattern bargaining, our theoretical aim is to introduce the concept of *egalitarian inequality*: although the wage-setting system in corporatist countries with a pattern bargaining model, leads to an overall more egalitarian wage structure than in disorganized systems, it has a built-in gendered inequality. In how far the gendered nature of the economy and the resulting loss of pay is upheld through the pattern bargaining system is missing from the current discussion on resolving the gender pay gap. We claim that the system of wage formation in corporatist systems, where collective wages are formed in accordance to the male dominated manufacturing sector, create more egalitarian wage structures that, however, inhibit an implicit bias towards sectors where male workers are concentrated. Even though female workers, in corporatist systems, are part of a more collective equal pay structure, the pattern bargaining model is practiced in a way that undermines the wage growth of female dominated sectors compared to male dominated sectors with comparable levels of education and thereby constructing a system of egalitarian inequality.

This article offers novel insights into the relationship between gender pay equity and collective bargaining by analyzing the public discourse on the wage-setting structure through the lens of the Norwegian pattern-bargaining model. Norway is a particularly relevant case for several reasons. It is a world leader in gender equality, but the gross income of employed women is about two-thirds that of employed men, and women's hourly wages are on average 89% those of men (Center for Research on Gender Equality (CORE) Indikator, 2017). A main reason for this is the feminization of work with a resulting loss in pay in women-dominated sectors. Moreover, male- and female-dominated sectors are locked into different bargaining areas. In a corporatist system like Norway, wages are set through pattern bargaining. Central to this model is that during sectoral wage negotiations, the male-dominated manufacturing sector bargains first, and its wage outcome forms a norm for wage growth, which has a strong influence on wage-setting in the rest of the economy. Despite the central role of pattern bargaining for wage-setting, empirical research on the gendered nature of pattern bargaining is missing.

Our distinct contribution is that the Norwegian public discourse presents pattern bargaining as a sacred feature for the sustainability and egalitarian nature of the Norwegian economy. At the same time the discourse presents the Norwegian wage-setting system as maintaining and thereby contributing to the continuation of pre-existing gender pay differences across sectors. The public discourse is examined through so-called Norwegian official commissions (in Norwegian, *Norges offentlige utredninger* [NOUs]) that offer policy advice to the government. Corporatist regimes like Norway have a strong tradition of corporatist interest representation and technocratic policy-making (Heclo, 1974) through ad hoc advisory commissions such as the Norwegian NOUs (Arter, 2008). Based on a document analysis mainly of two pivotal official commission reports (NOUs) that have contributed vitally to how the discourse on the wage-setting model and on gender equality in the labor market is understood in Norway, our analysis focuses on problem representations (Bacchi, 1999) of unequal pay in relation to the pattern-bargaining model. Taking our cue from Danieli (2006), we show a simultaneous discourse of acknowledgment and abdication. Findings show that the NOUs acknowledge a relationship between the Norwegian wage formation system (one that keeps the gender pay gap constant) but abdicate acting on it by way of, for example, introducing changes to the process of centralized wage bargaining. A hierarchy of norms exists that subordinates gender equality to pattern bargaining, captured by the concept of egalitarian inequality.

The paper proceeds as follows. We start by presenting the Norwegian context in relation to gender equality and the labor market. In the section thereafter we discuss the concept of egalitarian inequality in connection to earlier scholarship on comparable worth and collective bargaining in light of its gendered dimensions. Then, we present our method followed by our analysis of the official commission reports. Finally, in the discussion of our findings we emphasize how this analysis contributes to understanding processes of egalitarian inequality in a country widely praised for its gender-equality advancements.

## 2 | EMPLOYMENT, GENDER-SEGREGATED LABOR MARKET AND THE GENDER PAY GAP

The employment rate in Norway is high relative to the European average, due in particular to high participation in the labor market among women and older workers. Women's labor-market participation increased sharply in the 1970s and 1980s, and then the gendered employment gap narrowed smoothly throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Reisel, 2014). In parallel with women's increased labor-market participation, the pay gap between men and women (measured as the difference in hourly wages) significantly declined in the 1970s and 1980s (Barth, Bryson, et al., 2014). Since the 1990s, however, the differences between men's and women's average hourly wages have only modestly approached each other (NOU, 2008). A main cause of this stagnation in the pay gap is due to the gender-segregated labor market and the differences in wage levels that follow. This is linked to a wage-formation system based on the principle of a male-dominated competitive industry as the wage leader: the pattern-bargaining model.

Apart from the principle of equal pay in the Gender Equality Act, there is no legislation on wage determination. Collective agreements are the principal sources of wage determination. Central to the Norwegian pattern-bargaining model, also called the Aukrust model (1977) or the wage-leadership model, is the distinction between tradable and non-tradable sectors. Tradable sectors, such as manufacturing and finance, sell most of their products on the world market and encounter foreign competition. Non-tradable sectors, such as health and education, which is equivalent to the public sector in Norway, consist of locally rendered services. During sectoral wage negotiations, a tradable sector or the male-dominated manufacturing sector bargains first. The wage outcome in this sector forms a norm for wage growth, which has a strong influence on wage-setting in the rest of the economy. In fact, wage growth cannot exceed what the tradable sector can handle, thus sustaining a sufficiently large, internationally competitive sector. This coordinated wage mitigates wage differentials between workers across firms and industries, establishing an egalitarian wage structure (Barth, Moene, & Willumsen, 2014). However, this Norwegian wage regime was developed under the male-breadwinner model and when it comes to wage formation, pattern bargaining implicitly values male-dominated sectors more highly in terms of value creation (Skjeie & Teigen, 2003).

### 3 | EGALITARIAN INEQUALITY: INSTITUTIONAL WAGE-SETTING AND THE GENDER PAY GAP

Building on earlier scholarship (Skjeie et al., 2019; Skjeie & Teigen, 2003; Teigen & Skjeie, 2017), this article introduces the concept of *egalitarian inequality*. The concept refers to how feminized work receives less pay than work in male-dominated sectors with comparable levels of qualifications. Here, we look at how this inequity is embedded in the formal Norwegian wage-setting institution of collective bargaining called the pattern-bargaining model. Institutional research shows that labor markets without both legal and collective wage regulation, such as Anglo-Saxon countries (the USA or the UK), are far from egalitarian (Hayter & Weinberg, 2011). In Nordic countries, by contrast, the main purposes of institutions that influence wage-setting, such as pattern bargaining, are to increase fairness and reduce potential inequality. Collective bargaining is necessary to promote fair, transparent systems of pay determination by establishing “going rates” for categories of labor, the common rule proposed by Webb and Webb (1987), rather than leaving pay decisions to managerial discretion under the guise of the market, which is common in Anglo-Saxon countries. According to Webb and Webb (1987), collective bargaining promotes fair-wage systems because it raises the wage floor, reducing inequalities within sectors. Empirical studies have suggested that coordinated bargaining, like the Norwegian pattern-bargaining model, is conducive to wage moderation and thus reduces inflation while avoiding inequality (Traxler & Brandl, 2012). More recently, scholars have questioned whether this ideal model of wage formation actually benefits all workers, mainly looking at class relations (Ibsen, 2015), but not at gender implications.

The balance of scholarly evidence thus suggests that collective bargaining indeed reduces intra-sectoral wage inequality (Hayter & Weinberg, 2011; Rubery & Johnson, 2019) but not necessarily gender pay inequality between sectors. The main argument is not that wage-setting via collective-bargaining channels is unfair as such. Rather, despite collective-bargaining wage-setting supporting an egalitarian wage structure, it likely entails gendered cultural valuations, which have become part of the formal structure. This is what we conceptualize as egalitarian inequality. In contrast to market-determined wages, scholars point out that women may suffer more than men under conditions of full deregulation and market or managerially determined wage-setting (Rubery & Johnson, 2019). Nevertheless, it is important to study different wage-formation systems and their eroding influence on wage gaps between female- and male-dominated jobs. For one, feminist scholarship suggests that men more than women benefit from collectively negotiated wages (Hayter & Weinberg, 2011). In Norway, too, in the context of equal-pay discussions in the 1960s in Norway, the trade union umbrella organization *Landsorganisasjonen* (LO) first and foremost represented the interests of male industrial workers. The trade union fought for white male workers' rights using a collective bargaining model made for them (Skjeie & Teigen, 2003).

While the gendered nature of the pattern-bargaining model is little-studied, it thematically fits into feminist scholarship on comparable worth (England, 1992): the tendency to pay female-dominated jobs less than male-dominated jobs, even when their competence requirements are quite similar, such as education level. Comparable worth raises an issue akin to equal pay for work of equal value, but it emphasizes structural features that transcend individual discrimination. Comparable worth concerns pay differences appearing to result from gender bias rather than other job characteristics (England, 1992). The central proposition is that “cultural processes of valuation are gendered; because women are devalued, social roles (including occupations) and skills that are associated with women are culturally devalued relative to those associated with men” (Kilbourne et al., 1994, p. 694). The argument here is that past and present discrimination “by employers and male-dominated trade unions resulted in sex-segregated jobs and wage rates for female-dominated jobs that are systematically lower than wage rates for jobs of similar complexity usually held by men” (Acker, 1989, p. 6). With this comparable-worth perspective, the role of how jobs are evaluated and wages are set comes into focus. However, so far, we have little insight into how the particular institutional mechanisms of pattern bargaining contribute to the gender pay gap in feminized areas of work. This is important because scholarship in industrial relations has established that the pattern-bargaining model as such as the most effective system in establishing an equal wage structure.

While there is recognition that collective bargaining has been oriented around a white, full-time male workforce, there is less awareness of the possible conflicts between the interests of women and “mainstream” union activities, that is, the pay decisions and habits of organizing the labor market (Wajcman, 2000). To a certain extent, this has been discussed under the term and practice of “equality bargaining”: the practice of advancing workplace gender equality through collective negotiation (Heery, 2006; Williamson & Baird, 2014). For example, in Sweden, a special fund termed the Gender Equality Pot was introduced into collective bargaining in the blue-collar sector in 2007, explicitly targeting women with low salaries. It was a unique construction aimed at equalizing the gender pay gap between sectors (Erikson, 2021). However, even though a temporary increase was possible, this special fund was discontinued only after a year due to resistance by the male-dominated metal union (*ibid.*). The focus on negotiating special measures to benefit female employees, who are seen to have needs that are different from those of men, can lead to women's issues being compartmentalized in negotiation, effectively blinding the collective-bargaining process itself to gender (Dickens, 2000). This shows that “wage setting is always inherently political and never a technical matter” (Rubery & Johnson, 2019). It is thus important to develop comprehensive approaches to address the gender pay gap within wage-setting structures.

## 4 | METHODS

For the document analysis, we were inspired by Bacchi's (1999) policy-constructivist approach for studying policy responses: “What is the problem represented to be?” Bacchi claimed that how a social problem is defined largely determines the relevant policy response. In other words, every policy proposal contains an explicit or implicit diagnosis of the problem. Here, we employ a content analysis to determine how the gender pay gap in relation to the gendered labor market is presented, how the pattern-bargaining model is presented as a solution or a hindrance, and which discourse dominates the other. How the problem is defined determines its solutions (Bacchi, 1999). We utilized the analytical questions developed by Bacchi (1999) for the data: What is the problem represented to be? What is the underpinned assumption of this representation? What is left unproblematic or silenced and if can it be thought of differently? Consideration of this perspective meant we were attentive to whether gender was present in the rhetoric on collective wage bargaining and how the reports represented themes such as “the underlying reasons for the gender pay gap,” “the underlying reasons for the gendered labor market,” the relationship between the pattern-bargaining model and the gendered labor market or the gender pay gap. We used the qualitative data analysis computer software Nvivo to code the text according to these themes. During the data analysis process, the data, codes, and themes were discussed among the authors to consolidate ideas and analysis. We thus looked for arguments in relation to collective

wage increases and the gender-segregated labor market and how this relationship was constructed in the documents. In addition, we examined how the topic of value was presented in relation to the gender pay gap and the collective wage formation model and also assessed how the pattern-bargaining model is seen in relation to correcting the wages of feminized sectors. By reading both reports and carving out these connections we carefully focused on how the gendered nature of collective wage formation entered the discussion and focused on sections when relevant connections between the gender pay gap and the pattern bargaining model were made, when no connections occurred and when possible connections were ignored.

The main policy documents analyzed for the purpose of this paper are the Equal Pay Commission (NOU, 2008) and the Wage Formation Commission (NOU, 2013). The analysis is based on portable document format versions of the NOU reports collected from the Norwegian government website ([www.regjeringen.no](http://www.regjeringen.no)). Additional documents analyzed for contextual purposes were The Job Evaluation Commission (NOU, 1997, p. 10) and the government report to parliament based on The Equal Pay Commission, Gender Equality for Equal Pay (Meld. St. 6, 2010–2011). Another relevant document is the commission mandated in 2016 to follow up on the Wage Formation Commission of 2013. The authors translated the quoted texts from Norwegian to English.

The NOUs have a policy-preparing function, which means that the government appoints the commissions aimed to examine policy questions and to contribute policy advice as a key element of the Nordic model of government (Arter, 2008). Commissions usually work for a year or longer, synthesizing existing knowledge and sometimes also commissioning or conducting new research. Their advice mainly feeds the policy-formulation stage of the decision-making process, that is, before the government proposes concrete policies (Christensen & Holst, 2017). NOU reports are official documents recognized as legal sources in Norwegian jurisprudence, normally including information on the composition and work of the commission, its considerations and proposals, and references to relevant documents and literature. Commission members come from the civil service, political parties, interest groups, academia or the private sector and are led by a chair and supported by a secretariat.

The two most important official commission reports discussing the gendered labor market and the Norwegian model of wage formation are the Equal Pay Commission (NOU, 2008) and the Wage Formation Commission (NOU, 2013). The Equal Pay Commission is the main government effort to collect research-based knowledge and assessment of equal-pay issues, while the Wage Formation Commission is the key reference point for all key actors in the labor market in relation to wage bargaining. It is, for example, consistently mentioned in the yearly policy statements of the LO. While the Equal Pay Commission was appointed to provide an overview of the differences between women's and men's pay and consider measures to reduce pay differences, the Wage Formation Commission was tasked with examining the system of wage formation and challenges in the Norwegian economy. The sitting government at the time, led by Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, commissioned both public inquiries.

The Equal Pay Commission consisted of seven academics. The leader of the committee was a county governor who was an educated nurse, former cabinet minister, constituted prime minister, and leader of the Centre Party. The committee represented a diverse mix of social science disciplines ranging from three economists, two sociologists, one political scientist, and one lawyer. The commission produced a report that was 310 pages long. By contrast, the Wage Formation Commission convened under the leadership of an economist and consisted of representatives from the trade unions, employers and government. Among those 10 members were representatives of trade unions, trade union umbrella organizations, employer associations, and representatives of government departments. At least half of the members were economists. The report they produced consisted of 176 pages. The Equal Pay Commission consisted mostly of academics from different social science disciplines, while the Wage Formation Commission was mainly represented by economists and actors from the trade unions, employers and government. The inclusion of trade union and employer representatives in the Wage Formation Commission signals the stronger impact of this commission, as its recommendations are already anchored among the trade union and employer association representatives before delivered the government. This is different from having academics draw recommendations, which still have to be discussed among the key actors in the labor market.

Since the institutional system of wage formation is vital to how the gender pay gap has developed, we interrogate both how commission reports present the problem and the relationship between the gender pay gap and the wage-formation system.

## 5 | THE GENDER PAY GAP AND PATTERN BARGAINING: IS ONE MORE EQUAL THAN THE OTHER?

In this section, we examine how the Equal Pay Commission report and the Wage Formation Commission report discuss the gender pay gap, particularly the problems they identify as its causes and their understanding of proposed solutions to reduce it.

### 5.1 | The Equal Pay Commission

The Equal Pay Commission, appointed by the Norwegian cabinet in 2006, published a comprehensive study on the equal-pay problem in Norway in 2008 with the title “Gender and Pay: Facts, Analyses and Measures to Promote Equal Pay.” It provided a holistic overview of the equal-pay problem in Norway and recommended measures to reduce pay differences. The commission submitted its report to the Ministry of Children and Family (*Barne-og familiedepartementet*). The committee’s mandate was to assess and analyze various causes of pay differences between women and men. The committee assumed that “there has been no systematic reduction in hourly rates between women and men since 1985,” although women have had increased employment and have as much education as men (NOU, 2008, p. 15).

In its report, the Equal Pay Commission summarized its knowledge of the causes of the gender pay gap. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on how it discussed the relationship between gender-segregated labor (and the resulting wage gap) and relate this to the pattern-bargaining model.

### 5.2 | The wage gap follows the gender-segregated labor market

According to the Equal Pay Commission, a main reason for the gender pay gap is the feminization of certain occupations. While women are dominant in the public sector, especially in the education and health sectors, men work largely in the private sector and in technical occupations (NOU, 2008, p. 184). The gender differences entail a variation in pay and status. In the report, the Equal Pay Commission emphasized that one cause of the feminization of work was gender-traditional educational and vocational choices:

The fact that the labor market is gender-segregated must not be understood as meaning that women and men are automatically locked into women and men’s occupations without thought for their own interests or preferences. On the contrary, Norwegian youth today are basically able to choose their own career path. At the same time, most choose traditional gender roles. (NOU, 2008, p. 184)

Here, the Equal Pay Commission report represented the feminization of work, on the one hand, as individual choices based on preferences but, on the other hand, also marked by gender-role socialization. The feminization of work means a loss in pay, not only historically, but actually and persistently.

A question the Equal Pay Commission set out to answer was why the lower remuneration of feminized jobs persists despite comparable levels of education. The report found that women with higher levels of education in the public sector (meaning at least a three-year Bachelor’s degree or higher) had lower pay levels than groups with comparable levels of education in the private sector (NOU, 2008, p. 138). The Equal Pay Commission thus established that the fem-



inization of work was a result of children continuously choosing jobs or professions according to traditional gender roles. It went on to show, however, that these choices resulted in a loss in pay for girls and women in their professional lives even though they are as studious as their male counterparts. The problem representation of the gender pay gap in the report was that a sectoral division creates a hierarchy of job remuneration. The Commission acknowledged the clear correlation between the gender composition of an occupation and its wage level: the higher the proportion of women, the lower the salary. The representation of gender inequality, in other words, is more than a problem of equal opportunity. Simply encouraging individual employers or workers to take action or change their preferences cannot be the only solution to closing the gender pay gap because the main problem with the feminization of work is the consequent loss in pay and status.

Having established the problem representation of the gender pay gap based on the feminization of work, the Equal Pay Commission set out to determine whether female-dominated groups had been doing poorer in collective bargaining than male-dominated groups in the past decades. This is important, as emphasized by the Equal Pay Commission, due to their historically different valuations and the nature of public and private sectors being “locked into” different bargaining areas within the Norwegian pattern-bargaining model. A chief insight of the report was that the wage level was the lowest in bargaining areas where the proportion of women was highest (NOU, 2008, p. 185).

The causes of the differentiation in the estimated or determined market value of occupations are considered to be connected to market power. Some occupations with an alternative labor market in the private sector had a stronger capability to negotiate wages—market power—than occupations without an alternative labor market in the private sector. Put differently, since there are few private health institutions or schools in Norway, nurses or teachers cannot threaten to migrate to the private sector to achieve a higher wage. Occupations in the public sector with higher salaries can typically threaten to migrate to the private sector and are simultaneously male-dominated. However, the tendency that female-dominated occupations receive relatively speaking lower salaries is also true in the private sector. The Commission nevertheless attaches importance to market power and the specificities of the branches (e.g., the hotel, restaurant, and cleaning industries) as explanations for the tendency of female-dominated professions to be consistently paid less than male-dominated ones. Thus, during collective bargaining rounds, the public sector can exercise less market power than the private sector.

However, the Equal Pay Commission also pointed to the greater wage dispersion in the private sector than the public. The more compressed wage structure existing in the public sector was understood mainly as the result of the priorities of the public sector's employee organizations. “Compressed wages in the public sector [are] probably to a large extent the result of the priorities of the employees' organizations in the public sector” (NOU, 2008, p. 184). According to the Commission, a compressed wage structure in the public sector particularly depresses wages for groups with more education. In other words, those at the top of the salary structure benefit the least from organizations prioritizing compressed wages.

A principal reason for the persistent gender pay gap between the female-dominated public sector and the male-dominated private sector (with comparatively equal levels of education), according to the Commission, is the pattern-bargaining model, which the next section explores.

### 5.3 | The gender pay gap and the pattern-bargaining model

One important task<sup>1</sup> of the Equal Pay Commission was to review the pros and cons of the Norwegian wage-bargaining model from a gender-equality perspective, that is, to consider how the pattern-bargaining model relates to the persistence of the gender pay gap. Due to the gender-segregated structures of the labor market, the Commission's report emphasized that the gender-segregated labor market divides women and men into different collective bargaining areas (NOU, 2008, p. 187). It pointed out that women with higher levels of education working in the public sector experienced poorer wage development because of the constraints of the pattern-bargaining model (NOU, 2008, p. 245). The wage increase established by the male dominated oil industry, for example, sets the wage norm to which other indus-



tries must adhere. Most women work in the public sector, which must follow the agreed-upon wage norm set by these industries (NOU, 2008, p. 245). In this wage-determination structure, female-dominated areas have seen increases through collective bargaining rounds similar to male-dominated industries in the past decade. As a percentage, wage growth has been approximately the same for female- and male-dominated bargaining areas from 1997 to 2005.

However, the Equal Pay Commission presented this as problematic. Similar wage growth in both female- and male-dominated sectors does not necessarily mean that the Norwegian collective bargaining model is gender-neutral. Rather, the Commission pointed out that the pattern-bargaining model reproduced a stable wage relationship between the sexes. There is no systematic skewing of wage growth to the benefit of male-dominated bargaining areas, but neither does the collective-bargaining model manage to change relative wage differences. According to the report (NOU, 2008, p. 32), pattern bargaining does not necessarily increase differences nor reduce or adjust the bias; "The pattern-bargaining model thus maintains and continues the pay differences that were there in the first place" (NOU, 2008, p. 187). Wage growth has been stable for both male- and female-dominated occupations.

Furthermore, the report emphasized that this system does not necessarily confer an advantage on male-dominated bargaining areas: "There is no systematic distortion of wage growth in favor of male-dominated bargaining areas, but the bargaining model is also unable to change relative wage differentials" (NOU, 2008, p. 32). The problem representation does not consider the bargaining system gender-neutral, instead arguing that it maintains stable wage relationships and thereby maintains wage differentials between different groups, including those between women and men (NOU, 2008, p. 187).

The Equal Pay Commission report claimed that the underlying reason for this discrepancy was that wage negotiations were a game between employer and employee organizations, where the party with market power often forces concessions to its demands (NOU, 2008, p. 133). According to the Commission's report, careers in the public sector are a good example: employees have not had the opportunity to use the market to increase their wages by moving to the private sector (NOU, 2008, p. 152). There is no systematic skewing of wage growth to the benefit of male-dominated bargaining areas, but neither does the collective-bargaining model change relative wage differences.

The report also indicated that adjusting the pattern-bargaining model had proved difficult in practice because wage increases for one group quickly led to new demands for wage increases by other groups. One of the Commission's main conclusions was that although the pattern-bargaining model was strongly recognized for its importance to the Norwegian economy and enjoyed broad support, there existed little scope for adjustments within it. Consequently, measures had to be sought outside the wage bargaining system.

One of the Equal Pay Commission's proposals to remedy the gender pay gap was a government lump sum to grant a pay raise for female-dominated professions in the public sector of 3 billion Norwegian Kroner (NOU, 2008, pp. 223 & 224) to counteract wage differences between female-dominated (public sector-centered) and male-dominated (private sector-centered) occupations (NOU, 2008, pp. 223 & 224). This would allow female-dominated professions to "catch up" while leaving the pattern-bargaining model in place. Whilst this report offers a way to improve the situation of the gender pay gap, it does not conceive of the wage bargaining model as such differently. It points to ways that can co-exist with how wages are negotiated collectively but not how the wage bargaining model can be adapted in order to close or significantly narrow the gender pay gap.

In sum, even though the problem representation of the Equal Pay Commission acknowledges that the pattern-bargaining model reinforces the gender pay gap, it offers a solution to temporarily balance it, not structurally change it. The proposal to remedy the situation implicitly justifies the model as important in the Norwegian economy and society.

## 5.4 | The Wage Formation Commission: Pattern bargaining as an important “pillar” of the Norwegian economy

In December 2013, a government-appointed commission was formed to “assess experiences of wage formation over the [past] 12 years” and to discuss “macroeconomic developments that may create challenges for the Norwegian economy and wage formation in the future” (NOU, 2013, p. 7). The committee was led by an economist and consisted of researchers, economists, and representatives from various employer and employee organizations and ministries. The Commission did not recommend any changes to wage formation as such but underscored the need for effective coordination of bargaining rounds (NOU, 2013), and they submitted their report to the Ministry of Finance.

The Wage Formation Commission's mandate was to examine the challenges of export-exposed industries and the system of wage formation in Norway in the years to come. The departure point for the Wage Formation Commission was that the pattern-bargaining model must be maintained, and it was asked to assess experiences with the model. The focus in the Wage Formation Commission's report is describing the wage formation and negotiation system in the Norwegian labor market and its positive consequences for the economy. The Wage Formation Commission was not tasked to assess the pattern-bargaining model but to assess its macroeconomic consequences for Norway; the gender pay gap is not mentioned in the commissions' mandate but is considered by the commission in the report. The report called the Norwegian model of pattern bargaining an important “pillar” in wage formation in Norway that contributed to smooth overall income development and smaller pay differences (NOU, 2013, p. 24). The Wage Formation Commission report's treatment of the gender pay gap in this respect makes for an interesting comparison with the Equal Pay Commission's report.

The Wage Formation Commission presented the main causes of the gender pay gap as resulting from the fact that men and women work in different industries and sectors. The Commission stated that men and women have different competences, work experiences, and levels of education, which were put forth as the main explanations for the gender pay gap (NOU, 2013, p. 151): “Women with higher education are more likely to work in the public sector than men with higher education” (NOU, 2013, p. 151). Furthermore, men and women are in industries with different wage abilities (*lønnsevne*), and they hold different positions in work organizations. To some extent, the Commission was also trying to reduce the impression of the gender pay gap's size by pointing to some men with high salaries as evidence that the gender pay gap in hourly wages was measured as average pay, not median pay (NOU, 2013, p. 151).

The Commission did not mention or connect the gender pay gap to debates on comparable worth, thus highlighting the importance of individual attributes in relation to the origins of the gender pay gap in the gendered labor market. The different valuations of occupations or sectors according to concentrations of men or women was not problematized by the Wage Formation Commission, which emphasized personal resources, such as education, work experience and competence, so that men and women's individual choices appeared to be the main explanation for the gender pay gap.

Regarding the relationship between the gender pay gap and the pattern-bargaining model, the Wage Formation Commission referred to the Equal Pay Commission. In particular, it emphasized the conclusion of the Equal Pay Commission that the pattern-bargaining model was gender-neutral regarding its contribution to the gender pay gap by not exacerbating it (NOU, 2013, p. 151). However, it omitted the next point in the Equal Pay Commission's reasoning: through its very gender neutrality, pattern bargaining also upheld the gender wage gap and therefore contributed to its perpetuation.

It is therefore notable that the policy proposal of the Wage Formation Commission pointed to the importance of collective wage agreements in raising the overall wage levels of female-dominated jobs in the public sector. Like the Equal Pay Commission, it highlighted the importance of collective-wage agreements to increase low wages in sectors where women dominate through the general mechanisms of collective bargaining (NOU, 2013). A difference between the two reports is that the Equal Pay Commission pointed to solutions outside the collective wage-bargaining system (e.g., see the proposal above to introduce a wage raise for female-dominated professions), while the Wage Formation

Commission advocated for wage increases through collective wage bargaining to limit the gender pay gap (Note that the Commission uses the word “limit” rather than “close” in regard to the gender gap.)

A noticeable difference can be observed in the two reports were received. On the one hand, the Equal Pay Commission's recommendation to implement a lump-sum compensation to female-dominated occupations was immediately rejected by Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg the same day as the Equal Pay Commissions report (NOU, 2008, p. 6) was launched (21st of February, 2008). A lump-sum compensation would imply an influx of money from the state budget to make possible a pay-raise in female-dominated occupations, considered an illegitimate interference with the right to bargain. LO-leader Roar Flåthen and other central actors among the social partners supported the Prime Minister's decision to reject the recommendations of the report. By contrast, trade unions organizing female-dominated occupations such as Unio voiced grave concerns about how the most powerful of the propositions in the report to adjust the gender pay gap was simply shot down by the prime minister, without the possibility to debate this adjustment. On the other hand, the reception of the Wage Formation Commission was quite different, characterized by calm and respectful reactions to the main recommendations. Some of the proponents of the “lump sum proposition” did express disappointment about the absence in the report about a recommendation to adjust the gender pay gap. The commonality between both reports is that both do not fundamentally question the pattern bargaining system as an equality producing wage formation model, even though acknowledging the negative impact in terms of wage development for the male dominated sectors. This is what we conceive of in terms of how the inquires relate to gender. The more acknowledgment of the equitable distribution of wages that accompanies collective wage formation is offset by the fact that there is an implicit bias towards upholding the differences in wages between the sectors. This is specifically pronounced when men and women are situated in different sectors, locked into different bargaining areas, with a lower valuation of female sectors, even those with comparable levels of education to those male dominated ones (Tables 1 and 2).

## 6 | DISCUSSION

The aim of this article is to study the dynamics of the persisting gender pay gap in a highly segmented labor market, where the portion of feminized work remains valued lower than those dominated by men with comparable levels of education. Drawing on previous literature (Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019; Saari et al., 2019; Skjeie et al., 2019; Skjeie & Teigen, 2003; Teigen & Skjeie, 2017), this article introduces the concept of *egalitarian inequality*. This concept encapsulates the acknowledgment but also abdication (Danieli, 2006) of the gendered nature of the Norwegian wage formation system displayed in the official commission reports in question. The reports we analyzed represent the Norwegian wage-setting system as a sacred feature of the Norwegian sustainable and egalitarian economy. At the same time, they acknowledge the maintenance and thereby contribution to the continuation of pre-existing gender pay differences through the concerted system of wage formation, by way of constraining the wage progression of the feminized public sector. We do not want to dispute previous findings that the pattern-bargaining model of wage formation and regulated industrial relation systems establish more egalitarian wage outcomes (Colling & Dickens, 1998). However, we do want to disentangle how actors discuss this egalitarian system of wage formation in relation to the gendered labor market and whether a hierarchy exists. As Forrest (1997) reminds us, most of our theoretical and empirical knowledge in the field of collective wage formation is based on the male-breadwinner model. Findings here show that this well-functioning and mostly egalitarian collective wage formation system is gendered, but also not only are ideas on how this could be addressed silenced, but a discussion about possible solutions in itself is not tolerated.

First, the analysis illustrates the acknowledgement of the gendered impact of the pattern-bargaining system by both reports. It shows that the gender-segregated labor market is problematized as the cause of the gender pay gap and that the pattern bargaining model reinforces the existing gender pay gap. Key actors in the Norwegian public discourse partly acknowledge the gendered nature of the wage formation model but this admission is neither acted

**TABLE 1** Problem representations in the Equal Pay Commission report, 2006

Problem representation	Underlying premises in this representation	What is left unproblematic/ Can it be thought of differently	Effects produced by this representation of the problem
Gender pay gap	The gender pay gap emerges because of the choices made by individuals, men and women	The structural features of the economy are not discussed in relation to the gender pay gap	The effect is that individuals have to make different choices in order for the gender pay gap to close, instead of adjusting the structural features of the collective wage setting process
Low or lower pay in female dominated occupations	The female dominated sector receives lower pay than the male dominated sector with comparable levels of education because of a lack in market power during collective bargaining rounds	How the overall wage bargaining model reproduces this uneven market power between the male and female dominated sectors is not problematized	The effect is an acknowledgment of the importance of the current wage bargaining model, as fundamental for the sustainability of the Norwegian welfare state and economy
Pattern bargaining	It reproduces but does not widen the gender pay gap	There is no discussion on how to change the pattern bargaining model itself but proposes a solution that can exist with the current model (a gender quality pot)	The effect is an acceptance of the current wage bargaining system and its effect on the gender pay gap

upon, nor part of the wider discussion as to how to eradicate the gender pay gap. A central representation in both the Equal Pay Commission and the Wage Formation Commission report is that the pattern bargaining model is neither the cause of the gender pay gap nor gender-neutral per se. Both commissions acknowledge the gendered nature of the wage formation model.

Second, there are different representations involved in how the reports present the underlying causes of this problem. Only the Equal Pay Commission presented a complex understanding of the gender pay gap. It points to the involvement of gender role socialization and the division of labor in the home and the mechanisms of working life, as well as presenting it as a product of gendered interests and preferences. The Wage Formation Commission emphasized gender differences in individual choices as to why women are overrepresented in relatively lower paid professions. Although the Equal Pay Commission emphasized the complexity of the factors driving the gender-segregated labor market, they constantly commented that the gendered structures were also products of interests and preferences. In Bacchi's (1999) terminology, the problem is largely defined as a problem of individual choices. Solutions should be found in ways to make individuals make less gender-typical choices.

Third, there are differences in how the Commissions address possible solutions. The Equal Pay Commission recommended implementing a government lump-sum grant compensation to female-dominated occupations to facilitate "catch up" with the higher pay in the male-dominated sector. It also proposed that it would be up to the social partners to decide which trade groups would be granted these raises. The presented solution to the problem offered to re-problematize the relationship between collective wage formation and the gendered labor market. It introduced the possibility of a separate wage increase for the female-dominated public sector. By contrast, the Wage Formation Commission ignored or silenced the suggestion put forth by the Equal Pay Commission to address the gender pay gap.

TABLE 2 Problem representations in the Wage Formation Commission report, 2013

Problem representation	Underlying premises in this representation	What is left unproblematic/ Can it be thought of differently	Effects produced by this representation of the problem
Gender pay gap	The gender pay gap emerges because of the choices made by individuals, men and women	The structural features of the economy are not discussed in relation to the gender pay gap	The effect is that individuals have to make different choices in order for the gender pay gap to close, instead of adjusting the structural features of the collective wage setting process
Low or lower pay in female dominated occupations	Female dominated occupations receive lower pay due to different competencies, work experience and levels of education between male and female dominated sectors	It is left unproblematic that the difference competencies in female dominated sectors are valued lower than male dominated sectors with comparable levels of education and competency	The effect is the formulation of the gender pay gap along sectoral lines due to individual choices and thereby pointing away from structural problems such as collective wage formation
Pattern bargaining	The wage formation model is regarded as lifting all wages	Whilst the pattern bargaining model lifts all wages it also holds the wage gap between the sectors constant	The effect is that the lifting of all wages is portrayed as more important than closing the gender pay gap

Recall that the Wage Formation Commission consisted of a mix of experts (economists) and representatives of the social partners, the latter who could be in a position to pave the way for this particular wage increase.

The findings reveal a dual commitment of upholding both pattern bargaining and gender equality but hardly any willingness to adjust the pattern-bargaining model to combat the gender pay gap. A clear hierarchy is expressed in which gender equality is subordinate to pattern bargaining. Implicitly, the simultaneous acknowledgement and silencing is part of the gendered understanding of appropriate wages for work conducted by men and women (Koskinen Sandberg, 2017). The silencing of discussion on how to lift the wages of the feminized public sector has become part of the formal structure and the gendered nature. The logic of the pattern-bargaining model that wage growth in all areas of the economy can only be as high as the wage increase determined by the industry most exposed to international competition leads “naturally” to the female-dominated occupations’ lower remuneration. Upholding the established egalitarian nature of the pattern bargaining nature is prioritized over adjusting the system according to the needs of major parts of the labor market where women are over-represented. In other words, the pattern-bargaining model does not establish the gender pay gap as such, but by the undervaluation of feminized sectors through gendered historical development that is upheld by how wage formation proceeds in Norway. We maintain this interconnection as the basis for what we call *egalitarian inequality*. In the case at hand, the relation between pattern bargaining and the gender pay gap can be understood as a case of *egalitarian inequality* where the pattern bargaining system is understood as an equality producing institution to the extend that the relationship to the gender pay gap cannot be discussed to the point that alternatives or even smaller adjustments to the existing system are silenced. There may be some main reasons for such discursive limitations. First, changes in the wage formation system to reduce the gender pay gap may be illustrative of policies where the circumstances that prevent change are so strong that change become difficult or impossible – they are immovable objects. Second, promotion of equal pay policies are impeded because the costs are argued to be too large and may tip over the sustainability of the Norwegian economy. The argument for policies to promote gender desegregation appear more appealing as they are less costly, although actual gender desegregation will

contribute to reduce the gender pay gap but not change unequal remuneration of occupations. Moreover, the male breadwinner norm may still be alive and influence the willingness to initiate effective changes. Finally, and maybe most importantly, there may exist a strong worry among key actors that changes in the wage formation system, typically considered fundamental to Norway's economic success, could lead to wage formation getting out of control. Hence, pattern bargaining has status as a sacred policy. Thus, a norm of egalitarian inequality, in this case the gender pay gap, becomes a blatant expression of how equality is the principle that must give way in the face of other and supposedly more important considerations.

The seemingly neutral practice of having the male dominated, manufacturing sector set the wage norm for other industries. The implications for gender remain hidden in the technical specificities of the wage-formation model, making studies like this one important in highlighting the hidden gendered effects of formalized wage-setting institutions that are not related to gender-specific policies. This is similar to Dawson's (2014) point that women's interests tend to become marginalized in collective bargaining. Here, however, the undervaluation of female work is already part of the particular nature of the pattern-bargaining model and subordinate to the economic benefits this wage-setting model creates for the Norwegian economy. The present study regards this trade-off as a rejection of equal pay and as an important societal problem. Using Bacchi's (1999) terminology, the gender pay gap is not understood as a problem in need of policy solutions within the important collective instrument of how wages are set for men and women working predominantly in different sectors.

By analyzing the arguments made by different actors, we are able to uncover the implicit or explicit ideologies that underpin such choices. However, these have particular material effects and the analysis thereof is beyond the scope of this article. This is a limitation of this article. Future studies need to examine the power relations between the labor market actors that are part of the Norwegian collective wage formation system, and which are part of the gendered way collective wages are set. Moreover, there is a need to contrast and compare similar systems of collective wage formation and their gendered effects in order to gain a better understanding of the relationship between pattern bargaining and the gender pay gap.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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## ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> The mandate of the Equal Pay Commission included identifying gender differences in hourly wages as well as their causes, their legal aspects, and the possibilities of reducing them.

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**How to cite this article:** Wagner, I., & Teigen, M. (2022). Egalitarian inequality: Gender equality and pattern bargaining. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 29(2), 486–501. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12774>