

International Women's and Labour Networks and the Struggle for Gender Wage Justice: The ILO's Minimum Wage Policy of 1927/1928 as a Turning Point

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Received 11 May 2024 | Accepted 3 July 2025 |

Published online 8 December 2025

Abstract

The article discusses the political struggles over gender-equitable wage policies that surrounded the emergence of the first international policy instruments on the minimum wage. The making of the ILO instruments on 'minimum wage-fixing machineries' adopted in 1928 intensified the interaction between the ILO, trade unions, and women's networks regarding the relationship between the minimum wage, the living wage, and equal pay, and gave a major boost to the internationalisation of the politics of gender wage justice. The article argues that the events of 1927/1928 constituted a turning point in the longer-term history of the international politics of equal pay and the minimum wage. It demonstrates that a full history of the politics of women's wages must carefully consider the diverging visions on the intertwinement between gender and class interests, and the role of paid and unpaid labour in the lives of working-class women and men, which shaped the mindsets of the actors.

Keywords

interwar minimum wage policies – equal pay – gender wage justice – paid and unpaid work – international politics of women's work – IFTU women trade unionists – international women's networks

Some two weeks after the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted its Minimum Wage-Fixing Machinery Convention (No. 26, 1928) and an accompanying Recommendation (No. 30, 1928), Albert Thomas, Director of the ILO's secretariat in Geneva, the International Labour Office, received a letter penned by a small group of socialist working-class women. The group belonged to the British Labour Party's South Hackney district branch in east London. Arriving belatedly, the handwritten message formed part of an international women-led campaign that aimed to pressure the ILO to inscribe a commitment to equal pay into its new international instruments on minimum wages. The letter defies simplifying readings of the demand for equal pay as relevant either just for the world of paid work, or just as a feminist and feminist-labourist demand aimed at the achievement of equal rights. The women from South Hackney, in essence, demanded equal pay as a way to get their husbands back to work by ensuring an adequate minimum wage standard:

June 29, 1928

To Albert Thomas

Dear Comrade

We women of the above section do most heartily support, equal pay for women and men, when doing work of equal value, and agree that women's rate shall be the same as the man's rate on the same job, as we feel that this would put more men into work, and do away with unfair competition which is now spoiling the unemployed man's chance. Success to all your efforts and with all good wishes

Yours Fraternally

R Jerry [?]

Hon.Sec¹

The letter might have perplexed not only those nonsocialist legal equality feminists who at the time had instigated and were orchestrating a women's campaign aimed at fostering the ILO's commitment to the policy of equal pay, but also ILO officials and some women trade unionists. Defying stereotypical readings of masculinist trade union interest in driving women out of the labour market via demands for equal pay and a male breadwinner wage, the letter recorded the voice of working-class women with first-hand experience of gendered wage competition and inadequate wages.

¹ Honorary Secretary of the Women's Section of the South Hackney Labour Party to Albert Thomas, 29 June, 1928, D 611/2010/02, International Labour Organization, Archives, Geneva, Switzerland (= ILOA).

Ostensibly, the goal of the ILO's initiative in the late 1920s was to secure minimum income standards or living wages for the working class as a whole.² Yet it also touched directly on key themes of the politics of women's work: women's wage-earning and their low wages, gendered wage differentials and a gendered or women-only minimum wage, and the gendered divisions of labour, including paid and unpaid work, within the working classes. The ILO's minimum wage initiative moved the contentious matter of the gender-specific setting of minimum wages to the realm of international politics, and triggered an international campaign for equal pay.

The article demonstrates that the ILO minimum wage initiative and the political interaction unfolding around it came to constitute a major contribution to the internationalisation of equal pay policies which has been largely overlooked in the scholarship.³ The international debates on minimum wage policies and gender wage justice of the late 1920s and early 1930s signalled that the political tide had begun to turn towards a proactive and overarching international politics of equal pay, including equal minimum wages for women and men. Situating these political exchanges within the larger interwar history of the internationalisation of the politics of women's wages, the article shows how diverging visions of the intertwinement between gender and class interests, and the role of paid and unpaid labour in the lives of working-class women and men, shaped the mindsets the actors brought to these conversations.

2 Historically, the concepts of the 'living wage' and the 'minimum wage' were closely related yet far from identical. In addition, both concepts were widely discussed, and defined and used in many different ways, including in relation to ideas such as the 'family wage', the male, female, or gender-neutral 'breadwinner wage', and wage differentials between women and men. Important insights on the (gender) history of these debates can be gained from Marilyn Lake, 'The Independence of Women and the Brotherhood of Man. Debates in the Labour Movement over Equal Pay and Motherhood Endowment in the 1920s', *Labour History*, (63) (1992), 1–24; Deborah M. Figart, Ellen Mutari, and Marilyn Power, *Living Wages, Equal Wages. Gender and Labor Market Policies in the United States* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2002), chs 5 and 6; Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement. Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), ch. 4; Colette Avrane, *Ouvrières à domicile. Le combat pour un salaire minimum sous la Troisième République* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013). The present article, when pointing to this overall history, combines the terms 'living' and 'minimum' wages.

3 Elisabeth Prügl, *The Global Construction of Gender. Home-Based Work in the Political Economy of the 20th Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 40–48, and Paula Määttä, *The ILO Principle of Equal Pay and Its Implementation* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2008), 89–100, are the only studies I know that discuss – both with a focus on the interventions of the legal equality feminists – some of the interactions related to minimum wages and equal pay at the ILO in the later interwar period.

1 **Actors and Agendas in the International Politics of Women's Work and Wages in the Interwar Period**

In the interwar period, the ILO, various trade unions and trade union confederations, and (socialist and nonsocialist) networks of women trade unionists and other women's networks worked towards the internationalisation of the politics of women's (paid and unpaid) work.⁴ Engagement with minimum wages and equal pay formed part of these initiatives. Many of the related interactions centred on the ILO, the multilateral organisation founded in 1919 which had quickly established itself as a key actor in international labour politics.

This emerging multi-actor setting of interwar international labour politics was characterised by three fundamental features. The first concerned the ILO's structure and mandate. Based on a tripartite arrangement which included government, workers' and employers' representation, the ILO pursued international labour politics and its implementation in states and empires around the world. It developed a complex policy process to generate international labour standards, that is, Conventions binding upon ratification together with non-binding Recommendations. Following detailed investigations, the International Labour Office devised draft labour standards in such a manner that adoption of the finalised instruments by the International Labour Conference (ILC) was likely, and ratification in many countries could be hoped for. In pursuance of the foundational ILO mandate of ensuring 'social

4 Discussions of these internationalisation processes can be found in: Prügl, *The Global Construction*; Françoise Thébaud, *Une traversée du siècle: Marguerite Thibert, femme engagée et fonctionnaire internationale* (Paris: Belin, 2017); Eileen Boris, Dorothea Hoehtker, and Susan Zimmermann, eds, *Women's ILO. Transnational Networks, Global Labour Standards, and Gender Equity, 1919 to Present* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2018); Eileen Boris, *Making the Woman Worker. Precarious Labor and the Fight for Global Standards, 1919–2019* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *For the Many: American Feminists and the Global Fight for Democratic Equality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021); Eileen Boris, 'From Industrial Evil to Decent Work: The ILO and Changing Perspectives Towards Home-Based Labour' In *Home-Based Work and Home-Based Workers* (1800–2021), eds Malin Nilsson, Indrani Mazumdar and Silke Neunsinger (Leiden: Boris, 2022), 122–47; James Keating, '"Woman as Wife, Mother, and Home-Maker". Equal Rights International and Australian Feminists' Interwar Advocacy for Mothers' Economic Rights.' *Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47 (4) (2022), 957–85; Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir and Silke Neunsinger, 'Closing the Gender Pay Gap. Global Concepts, Local Negotiations in Iceland and Sweden, 1900–1985', in: *Trade Union Activism in the Nordic Countries since 1900*, eds Jesper Jørgensen and Flemming Mikkelsen (Cham: Springer International Publishing; Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 351–79.

justice' and 'humane conditions of labour',⁵ the Office closely co-operated with the 'most representative' workers' organisations of the 'respective countries'.⁶ The ILO's constitution called on these organisations to represent the workers' side within the ILO. In the interwar period, the social-democratic leaning International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) dominated workers' representation within the ILO, including in the politics of women's work. Yet in parallel the Office, aiming to safeguard the international authority of the ILO, at all times duly considered the tripartite structure of the organisation, and thus government and employers' interests as well as those of the workers.

The ILO's tripartite structure resulted, secondly, in different women's networks enjoying differential status in relation to it. Women trade unionists potentially benefited from their union organisations' privileged access to policy-making within the organisation's tripartite structure. Yet the difficulties of making their voices heard within their own, men-dominated organisations, and thus within the ILO, did not go away. The women's branch of the IFTU and the women trade unionist networks which participated in it (referred to hereafter as the IFTU women) repeatedly experienced this discrepancy. In contrast to organised labour, women's organisations – many of them not aligned with socialism – did not enjoy formal representation within the ILO. In their relationship with the ILO, these organisations were reduced to an outsider-lobbyist position. At the same time, individual women belonging to these groups could acquire insider standing when representing governments, employers, or workers' organisations at the ILC; still, individual participation in an ILC session was different from continuous institutional standing as enjoyed by the IFTU. Representatives of non-trade unionist women's groups made minor institutional inroads in the 1930s as members of the newly established Correspondence Committee on Women's Work, which remained, however, a purely advisory body.

Decades-long political contention on women-specific labour law and practice constituted the third feature that impacted the internationalising struggles regarding minimum wages and un/equal pay in the interwar period. Within and across the socialist and nonsocialist women's activist networks, assessments of the usefulness or otherwise of women-specific regulations in labour law varied greatly. From 1919, the ILO's activities boosted the internationalisation of the politics of women's work. Political tension grew from the mid-1920s. In 1926, the liberal-progressive International Alliance of

5 International Labour Office, *The Labour Provisions of the Peace Treaties* (Geneva: ILO, 1920).

6 International Labour Office, *The Labour Provisions*.

Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (IAW) was challenged from within to commit to a strict legal equality position, yet it failed to do so. From this point onwards, proponents of strict legal equality between women and men in labour law – which these groups considered a precondition of women's equality at work – planned for the establishment of 'some International Group' to combat the 'various attacks on women's right to work made by the International Labour Organisation'.⁷ The Open Door International (ODI) was formally established in 1929. The same period saw increased efforts at the International Labour Office to rally socialist and nonsocialist women's groups in support of the ILO's policies of women-specific labour protection. Overall, among those international networks and organisations concerned with women's work, the idea that (future) international labour law might or should entail a stronger focus on equality between the sexes gained ground between the late 1920s and the mid-1930s.

Conceptually speaking, two key issues were at the core of the feminist, feminist-labourist, and labourist debates on gendered wage justice. The first concerned the relationship between demands for gender equality in labour law (in terms of wages) on the one hand, and class-based demands for adequate, minimum, or living wages, on the other. In their demands and policy scripts, strict legal equality feminists prioritised gender equality in labour law over demands for class progress such as a rise in wage levels. This was so even as they argued that strict legal sex equality in labour law was (or would become) the basis for real improvements in the position of the workers, that is, class progress in the world of work. As a result of this self-positioning, which focused on legal gender equality, these groups tended to delink the question of equal pay from the question of raising wages to more adequate or higher levels. When engaging with minimum or living wages, these groups demanded that gender equality be enshrined in any related wage policy template, while they remained silent or vague about wage levels to be achieved. Some women trade unionists, in turn, warned that prioritising equal pay (and thus sex equality) alone in labour law indeed might provoke a reduction in men's wages, and thus precipitate material loss for the working classes (an idea that also lurked behind some men trade unionists' support for the equal pay principle). These women also pointed to the danger that such policies might drive women out of the labour market, since employers might hire men at the expense of women workers when equal wage policies spurred a rise in women's wages. Many women trade

7 'Open Door Council. First Annual Report 1926/1927', 5–8, 5ODC, London School of Economics and Political Science, Women's Library, London, United Kingdom (= LSE-WL).

unionists and women labour activists focused on raising women's wages as a key means to narrow the gap between men's and women's rates, thus closely interconnecting ideas of material progress for the working classes with gender equality. In terms of practical demands and policies, they repeatedly focused on raising wage levels in 'feminised' branches and types of work, for example, via the re-evaluation of skills, the promotion of women's vocational training, and women's trade union organising; in some cases, they advocated women-specific minimum wages as a means of raising women's wage levels.

A second, closely intertwined core issue concerned the relationship between the demand for equal pay and the minimum or living wage on the one hand, and considerations related to the division of unpaid care and household labour within working-class families on the other. As just described, when demanding equal pay labour women tended to combine this principle with the notion of class progress. Yet this connection alone does not fully explain the logic and intention of a statement such as the one produced by the socialist women from South Hackney. These women seem to have demanded equal pay in the understanding that, rather than lowering men's wages, this would trigger a rise in women's wages, which in turn would result in an increased likelihood that employers would hire men at a rate that would make family ends meet and allow wives to reduce their engagement in paid work. The women from South Hackney, in other words, connected the combined principles of gender wage equality and class progress with the vision that working-class women should have the chance and choice to withdraw from the labour market – a third principle and one that transgressed the notions of gender equality and class progress on the labour market. The fact that many labour women invoked this principle had to do with their attention to working-class women's gendered family responsibilities and their attachment to this unpaid work. This impacted strongly on labour women's demands in the arena of wage policies. At the IFTU's International Trade Union Women's Conference in Brussels in 1933, Anna Boschek from Austria, a core representative of the IFTU women, clearly espoused this connection as she saw it. As she pressed for equal pay, Boschek also argued: '[T]he worst evil was the bad payment of women's work. ... It was also important that men's wages should be raised, for this would enable many working women to give up wage-work.'⁸ The women from South Hackney, Anna Boschek, and many

8 *Congress Brussels 1933. The Activities of the IFTU 1930–1933* (Paris: IFTU, 1934), 301. A fuller discussion of the issues summarised here can be found in Susan Zimmermann, *Frauenpolitik*

influential socialist women trade unionists obviously conceived of women workers as members of gendered working-class communities and considered that paid and unpaid labour formed part of the lived reality and self-identification of many working-class women.

Understanding the triple connection between equal pay, minimum or living wages, and gendered unpaid labour also helps to explain why women trade unionists repeatedly affirmed the idea of a minimum or living wage as a gendered concept *without* invoking and connecting these demands with the equal pay principle. Considerations related to working-class women's realities of and/or attachment to unpaid family labour played a key role in generating such approaches.⁹ These women trade unionists as a rule intransigently insisted on all women's right to paid work, and relentlessly struggled for the improvement of women workers' working and wage conditions. When supporting gendered or potentially gendered varieties of minimum or living wages, they did so in pursuance of their key vision that working-class women should have the option to (temporarily) withdraw from paid work. Only by including women trade unionists' consideration of working-class women's unpaid work in our interpretative frameworks of the history of the relationship between a minimum or living wage and equal pay can we avoid misconstruing the history of why some socialist women trade unionists were hesitant to highlight (or even invoke) the equal pay principle. Their reluctance was not because they would have prioritised class progress over gender equality in labour law; they did not simply bow to patriarchal men trade unionists' world vision; and they were not more 'conservative' than the more equality-oriented activist women's networks. Rather, their vision of working-class women's material well-being combined the idea of class progress on the labour market with the notion of working-class women's choice regarding paid labour and the recognition of the key role unpaid family labour played in the mindsets and daily lives of many working-class women.

Many nonsocialist equal rights and legal equality feminists, by contrast, tended to detach their advocacy for equal pay from any consideration of income-pooling and intra-family divisions of labour, focusing on an individualistic vision of women's full and equal inclusion in the world of paid work. A third perspective, which was also present in the interwar debates

und Männergewerkschaft. *Die IGB-Fraueninternationale und die internationale Geschlechterpolitik der Zwischenkriegszeit* (Vienna: Löcker Verlag, 2021), 201-12, 366-78, 513-66.

9 See also Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*.

and shared by (some) women activists across political divides, was that both women and men should be able to take care of dependants without becoming financially dependent themselves on a spouse. Its proponents advocated a gender-equitable living wage (often complemented by demands for mothers' pensions or motherhood endowments, benefits which would allow mothers of mostly very young children to temporarily withdraw from wage work).¹⁰

2 The Emerging ILO and the Internationalisation of the Debate on Wage Justice

Trade union and women's networks were aware in 1919 that the establishment of the ILO constituted a unique opportunity to institute international principles on wage policies, prefiguring ILO instruments with potentially far-reaching consequences for such policies in individual countries. Accordingly, during the Paris peace negotiations in 1919, trade unionist and other women's networks with an interest in the politics of women's work did their utmost to represent their related agendas regarding wage policies to the peace negotiators or, more specifically, to their Commission on International Labour Legislation. The topic of minimum and living wages, and of how the (emerging) ILO should address this issue, was an important concern for both the international women's and the trade union networks involved in the negotiations in Paris. While the IFTU demands laid before the Paris negotiators failed to clarify the relationship between the living wage, the minimum wage, and the principle of equal pay, several women representatives explained the connections they wished to see.

The IFTU laid before the Paris peace conference a summary of the 'minimum conditions' it wanted to see enshrined 'as an international labour charter' in the Treaty of Peace. This included: the demand that '[w]omen's work shall ... be based on the principle of equal pay for equal work'; the establishment of '[c]ommittees of representatives of employers and employed ... in all the districts containing home industries' with the 'legal power to fix rates of wages'; and the demand that '[i]n any case in which wages are

10 Lake, 'The Independence of Women', gives an enlightening discussion of this position. The reader edited by Gisela Bock and Pat Thane, *Maternity and Gender Policies. Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States, 1880s–1950s* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), remains foundational for the study of the intimate historical connection between the politics of women's paid and unpaid work in the period covered by this article.

insufficient to secure a normal standard of comfort, and if it is impossible to secure an agreement between workers and employers, the Government shall set up joint commissions to establish minimum wages.’¹¹ In contrast to the IFTU, women did not speak with a united voice in Paris. The women’s deputation to the labour commission charged with the preparation of the ILO constitution and the agenda of the first general assembly of the new organisation consisted of key representatives of nonsocialist women’s organisations and well-known women trade unionists of diverse political alignments. Some of their demands called for the rejection of women-specific and gender-differentiated minimum wages. Trade unionist and feminist Gabrielle Duchêne ‘asked that in fixing a minimum wage account should be taken of equal pay for men and women’. Maria Vérone, representing the Ligue française du Droit des Femmes, argued that ‘the principle of the minimum wage’ which was to ‘be the same for a woman as for a man, when the work was the same,’ should be enshrined into the Treaty of Peace. Her organisation, Vérone explained, demanded that these minimum wages should be fixed ‘in proportion to the cost of living in each country’.¹²

Only after the labour commission had heard the women’s delegation speak on 18 March did an international women’s committee assembled at Paris come up with the final wording of its own ‘Charte internationale du Travail’. The Charte, while not addressing the minimum wage level in the different countries in terms as definite as Maria Vérone’s statement, unmistakably clarified the relationship between the minimum wage, the living wage and equal pay: ‘A minimum living wage, established in conformity with the principle of “equal pay for equal work”, shall be fixed for all categories of workers’, that is, including women and men. ‘The minimum wage must be, in the widest acception [*sic*] of the term, a *living-wage*, i.e. high enough to ... enable [the worker] to bring up a family under satisfactory conditions.’¹³

The actions of the women’s networks and the IFTU trade unionists – the latter were overwhelmingly men, although they included the British trade unionist and parliamentarian Margaret Bondfield – wielded some influence on the ILO constitution and initial agenda setting.¹⁴ Yet in the constitution,

11 *Official Bulletin* 1 (April 1919–August 1920), 255–59. The ‘labour charter’ was identical with IFTU demands adopted earlier in 1919.

12 *Official Bulletin* 1 (April 1919–August 1920), 161–75.

13 *Charte Internationale du Travail. Présentée par le Comité Féminin Français du Travail*. (Paris: Secrétariat du C.F.F.T., [1919]), 1:3–6, 9, 17–18 [available online via Gallica].

14 Documented in *Official Bulletin* 1 (April 1919–August 1920), 116, 123, 161–75, 194–95, and ‘Pre-Commission Documents’ 31, D/600/0/01/1, ILOA.

just as in the IFTU labour charter, references to the living wage on the one hand and equal pay on the other remained distinct. The 'provision of an adequate living wage' formed part of the preamble of Section I of the provisions on 'Labour' contained in the Paris peace treaties describing the 'Organisation of Labour', that is, the future ILO. By contrast, the equal pay provision was banished to a separate Section II of the 'Labour' provisions, which laid out 'general principles' deemed 'to be of special and urgent importance' by the parties contracting the peace treaties. Here, both the 'payment to the employed of a wage adequate to maintain a reasonable standard of life as this is understood in their time and country' and the vision that 'men and women should receive equal remuneration for work of equal value' were advocated, although again in separation from each other.¹⁵

The labour commission rejected the demand from the ranks of the women's delegation they were hearing in Paris to put the '[a]pplication of the principle of equal pay for equal work' on the ILC's agenda in 1919. Instead, it decided to notify the Governing Body of the International Labour Office about this proposition, in the understanding that it might consider the proposition as an agenda item for a subsequent annual session of the ILC.¹⁶

3 Internationalising Minimum Wage Policies: Gendered Foundational Tensions

The ILO in the following years did not formally act upon either of the two principles of equal pay and the living wage, although it engaged in knowledge production.¹⁷ Before 1927, the exchanges regarding possible ILO action on minimum wages did not connect the question of (minimum) wage regulation with the vision of equal pay. Rather, in ILO material produced at the time, the fact that in various countries minimum wages were set for women alone, and/or differential rates were set for women as compared with men, was simply reported. For example, an article published in the ILO's flagship journal *International Labour Review* in 1920 discussed women-only minimum wages in France and the

15 International Labour Office, *The Labour Provisions*. See also fn. 67 below.

16 *Official Bulletin* 1 (April 1919–August 1920), 187–88, 194–95.

17 Emmanuel Reynaud, *The International Labour Organization and the Living Wage: A Historical Perspective* (Geneva: ILO, 2017), section II; this paper does not discuss the equal pay connection of the ILO's engagement with minimum wages.

United States as a 'relic of the past'. The article did not mention the possibility and practice of setting unequal minimum wage rates for women and men.¹⁸

The internationalisation via the ILO of the debate on wage regulation in these early years thus can be described as an internationalisation of the knowledge on gendered difference enshrined in minimum wage policies without engaging with the critique thereof. Taken together, the early interwar period saw a combination of two developments which, as discussed further below, carried potentially far-reaching policy implications for the emerging international politics of women's work: because the ILO built its emerging international knowledge on data about national or local practice, and because it kept distinct the newly internationalised principle of equal pay and its interest in minimum or living wage policies, there was a chance that future ILO wage policy templates might generate additional legitimacy, on the international plane, for the pursuance of gendered minimum wage policies.

The early 1920s saw ongoing interaction between the International Labour Office and the international labour and women's networks, regarding the development of international minimum wage policies. In 1923, the Office, reporting to the Governing Body,¹⁹ described international minimum wage legislation as a 'duty' of the ILO and referred to the 'capital importance' of the adequate wages principle contained in the ILO constitution. The report referred to 'workers' organisations' which had urged the Office 'to approach the States Members with a view to the establishment of a living wage'. Contemporary practices and concepts of living wages based on the vision of a family wage for the male worker, or living wages set differently for women and men, thus were implicitly invoked but not mentioned directly. The Office made sure that, rather than 'fixing ... an international minimum wage', the planned instrument would concern institutions and their functioning (i.e., what soon would be labelled 'machineries') that negotiated and set minimum wages for specific jobs or groups.

In parallel, women trade unionists and women labour activists organised in the International Federation of Working Women (IFWW), which at the time was in close cooperation with the IFTU, published carefully assembled information on minimum wages in many countries. Here, appreciation of

18 'Minimum Wage Legislation for Low-Paid Industries in Europe', *International Labour Review* 4 (2) (1920), 108–38.

19 *Minutes of the 17th Session of the Governing Body of the International Labour Office, Geneva, January/February 1923* (International Labour Office), 103–04, for the following quotes.

women-alone standards could be found.²⁰ At their 1923 congress in Vienna, the women discussed a report on the 'Methods of Regulating the Wages of Home Workers', and requested the International Labour Office to conduct an inquiry on the position of 'homeworkers of both sexes ... in all nations'. The report contained data about 'day wages (i.e. the rate on which piece prices are fixed)' as well as 'piece prices' for home-based work in several European countries, recording glaring differences between women's and men's wages.²¹ One way to align the vision of minimum wage-setting with the vision of equal pay – without referring directly to the latter – was to connect the positive evaluation of the principle of the 'statutory regulation of out-work rates' with a wage system based in 'piece-work' rates. This was the position advocated in 1925 by Gertrud Hanna, German trade unionist and member of the newly established IFTU Women's Committee, during the first meeting of the Committee.²² Later Hanna declared that her preference was for higher wages for women's work in the women-dominated branches, and it was against this background that she considered that 'she was not a fervent upholder of the slogan "Equal Pay for Equal Work"'.²³ In general, IFTU women trade unionists emphasised the connection between equal pay and class progress. So did Valerie Novotná, who, reporting to the IFTU's 1936 International Conference of Women Trade Unionists in London, highlighted that the rise of 'the general living and wage standard of the working class' would follow as a direct result from a successful struggle for equal pay.²⁴

Within the International Labour Office, preparations for action regarding minimum wages finally made inroads, if against great resistance, in the Governing Body. While the 1923 initiative mentioned above was voted down,

20 *Die Arbeiterin. Monatsbeilage zu den Presseberichten des Internationalen Gewerkschaftsbundes. Zusammengestellt vom Internationalen Arbeiterinnenbund*, (1) (25 January 1923), 2; (2) 2 February 1923, 6–7; (3) (2 March 1923), 12–13; (5) (4 May 1923), [18]–19.

21 'Methods of Regulating the Wages of Home Workers. A Report Presented to the Congress of the IFWW, Vienna, August 14th to 18th, 1923', TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University, London, United Kingdom (= LMU-TUC); IFWW, *Working Women in Many Countries. Report of Congress Held at Vienna August 1923* (Amsterdam: IFTU).

22 'Minutes of the Meeting of the International Committee of Trade Union Women, November 3–4, 1925', MSS.292/62.14/4, Trades Union Congress Collection, University of Warwick, Modern Records Centre, Warwick, United Kingdom (= UW-MRC-TUC).

23 'Minutes of the Meeting of the International Committee of Trade Union Women, November 2–3, 1926', UW-MRC-TUC MSS.292/62.14/4, UW-MRC-TUC.

24 'International Conference of Women Trade Unionists [7 July 1936], Die Arbeitsfreiheit der Frau. V. Novotná', no. 133, IFTU Collection, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, Netherlands (= IFTU-IISH).

minimum wages were finally adopted in 1925/1926 as a topic for the 1927 ILC session.²⁵ Based on the governments' answers to a detailed draft questionnaire, a report on minimum wage legislation would be generated. Regarding the principle of equal pay, a foundational gendered tension was built into the internationalisation process thus generated. If the ILO instruments on minimum wages explicitly mentioned the option of gendered difference in minimum wage regulations, or implied toleration of such options by remaining silent about equal pay, this would lend additional – explicit or implicit – international legitimacy to the inscription of gendered difference in minimum wage legislation and practice. Policy-makers in national contexts and negotiators of collective agreements, in the future, would be able to refer to ILO norms as neither ruling out nor explicitly endorsing such legislation, claiming that ILO labour law validated such law and practice. Yet the internationalisation of minimum wage legislation also carried a contrasting opportunity. In its international norms, the ILO might also delegitimise the politics of gendered difference in minimum wage legislation and practice via explicitly inscribing the equal pay principle in the planned international instruments. By conjoining the two principles that were kept separate in the ILO constitution, newly invented international minimum wage norms could also serve as a point of reference in national policy contexts and collective bargaining for opponents of gendered difference in minimum wage legislation and practice.

Actors engaging with the making of the ILO's international instruments on the minimum wage could not escape positioning themselves with regard to these two alternative options. As discussed below, this is one key reason why, viewed from a long-term historical perspective, the policy process of 1927 and 1928, which led up to the adoption of these instruments, would prove to be a defining – and thus far largely overlooked – historical moment in the internationalisation of the equal pay doctrine.

4 Gendered Minimum Wage Practices Very Nearly Gain Recognition in the International Arena Governed by the ILO

By 1927, the International Labour Office no longer avoided directly addressing gendered difference in regulations on minimum wage-making by state-instituted

25 *Minutes of the 17th Session*, 47–49; *Minutes of the 29th Session of the Governing Body of the International Labour Office, Geneva, October 1925* (International Labour Office), 42–45; *Minutes of the 30th Session of the Governing Body of the International Labour Office, Geneva, January 1926* (International Labour Office), 6–15, 17.

‘machineries’. The question of the relationship between minimum wage legislation and the concept of a – potentially gendered – living wage now came to play a visible role in and around the ILO. The first Office Report to the ILC on the ‘Minimum Wage-Fixing Machinery’ described in detail how in several countries minimum wage policies were built upon the concept of a gender-differentiated ‘living wage’, as justified by an emphasis on the male worker as breadwinner.²⁶ The Report presented the living wage as one of the various possible ‘bases’ to which minimum wage regulations in practice could, and did, refer in individual countries. Oftentimes, the Office maintained, minimum wages set for women were ‘based on the requirements of ... maintaining herself, but without dependents’. The Report did mention those arguments that challenged gender-specific living wages with reference to the principle of equal pay or to gender wage justice more broadly. Yet it presented them – however diplomatically cloaked – as less relevant:

The basis under consideration [that is, the ‘living wage’ as point of reference for the setting of a minimum wage] is sometimes criticised by advocates of the principle of equal pay for equal work between men and women. If the basic wage for a man is fixed in relation to the requirements of an average family, and that for a woman only to her own needs, the principle appears not to have been applied. To this argument the reply is often advanced that women working in occupations to which the women’s basic wage applies are not necessarily doing work equal to that performed by men in occupations to which the men’s basic wage applies.

The Report concluded that the establishment of international principles regarding various possible ‘bases’ for minimum wages – that is, the indication of relevant or preferable points of reference for the establishment of minimum wages in an international labour Convention – was ‘difficult’. Consequently, decision-making about possible ‘bases’ to which wage-arbitrators or minimum wage boards were to refer was to remain a prerogative of the governments concerned. The ILO, in turn, would be well advised to address the ‘bases’ for minimum wages in a Recommendation, possibly to accompany the planned Convention. This was a course of action that (still) *did* envision an ILO instrument concerned with the ‘bases’. As a result, the draft questionnaire

²⁶ Quotes in this paragraph and the next are from *ILC. Tenth Session. Geneva, 1927. Minimum Wage-Fixing Machinery. Report and Draft Questionnaire* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1927).

prepared by the Office inquired about the 'living wage' as one possible 'base' to which wage-arbitrators and wage boards might refer when determining minimum rates of wages.

When the ILC convened in 1927, negotiating the possible adoption of an ILO instrument in 1928, the barely concealed affirmation by the International Labour Office of a gender-differentiated living wage as one of the possible 'bases' to which minimum wage regulation might refer did not generate debate. The French government representative even attempted to include in the questionnaire a direct reference to gendered wage differences in connection with minimum wages, but the attempt failed.²⁷ The French workers' delegate and conference committee member Jeanne Chevenard, who served on the IFTU Women's Committee, implicitly challenged the notion of the male breadwinner as justification for possible sex-specific minimum wages when she argued that *female* home workers (also) 'had families to look after'.²⁸ In the questionnaire adopted for circulation to the governments, the question on possible points of reference for determining minimum wages no longer mentioned any of these possible 'bases', and thus reference to the living wage had also disappeared.²⁹

5 The ILO Is Called to Take a Stand on Gender and Minimum Wages

In the year that elapsed between the 1927 and 1928 ILC sessions, the political constellation between those international actors who entertained an interest in getting right – from their respective perspectives – the ILO's emerging international minimum wage template shifted remarkably. In other words, the gender politics which the future ILO instruments might pursue in terms of advocating, tolerating, or ruling out gender difference in

27 '[Committee on Minimum Wage-fixing Machinery 1927] Report of the Sub-Committee on Minimum Wage-fixing Machinery', D 610/1000/3, ILOA.

28 '10th ILC. Committee on Minimum Wage-Fixing Machinery. Fourth Sitting, Afternoon [Minutes]', 20 May 1927, 27, D 610/1000/1, ILOA.

29 *ILC. Eleventh Session. Geneva, 1928. Minimum Wage-Fixing Machinery. Questionnaire* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1927), 9. In the 1927 ILC conference committee, government representatives were instrumental in getting rid of the reference to 'bases'. Besides Chevenard, another well-known woman sat on the Committee: the Swedish government representative, Kerstin Hesselgren. 'Committee on Minimum Wage-Fixing Machinery [1927]. Questionnaire Proposed by the Government Members of the Sub-Committee', D 610/1000/3, ILOA; 'Committee on Minimum Wage-Fixing Machinery [1927]. Questionnaire Proposed by the Sub-Committee', D 610/1000/3; '[Committee on Minimum Wage-fixing Machinery 1927] Report of the Sub-Committee'.

minimum wage-making, turned into an explicitly and openly debated question. Socialist and nonsocialist women's groups and the IFTU keenly prepared for final decision-making by the ILC.

Against the background of the gendered foundational tension shaping the process of internationalising minimum wage policies, it was anything but coincidental that the developments at the ILO generated strong interest and anxiety in woman activists' circles. Soon after the ILC concluded its 1927 deliberations, the IFTU's International Trade Union Women's Conference, assembled in Paris, demanded the ILO adopt a minimum wage Convention. At this point, the IFTU women did not – publicly – discuss issues of equal pay or the living wage.³⁰ At the time, the IFTU as a whole did not reach (for reasons not fully discussed here) an agreement on its position regarding the upcoming second discussion of the minimum wage legislation at the ILO set for 1928. Influential national branches contemplated a family-related living wage. The British quoted 63 and 35 shillings for men and women respectively as the 'most generally accepted figures for a living wage' in their country.³¹ The International Council of Women (ICW), the large 'moderate' international women's organisation, had decided in 1925 to launch an initiative to generate and collect concrete knowledge about unequal pay. The ICW's Standing Committee on Trades and Professions was to circulate a questionnaire asking the organisation's national affiliates to report 'as precisely as possible about the differences between men's and women's wages and salaries' in different professions 'in your country'. The ICW actively sought collaboration with Martha Mundt, the responsible official within the International Labour Office.³²

After the 1927 ILC session, the Office, in its official communications regarding the planned minimum wage instruments, refrained from further engagement with gendered living wages and gendered difference in wage-setting more generally. Referring to the ILO constitution, the Office now

30 *Internationale Gewerkschaftliche Arbeiterinnenkonferenz abgehalten am 29. und 30. Juli 1927, im Grand Palais, Paris* (Amsterdam: Verlag des IGB), 54–60, 62.

31 'Die Verfahren zur Festsetzung der Mindestlöhne. Bericht über die Frage der Mindestlöhne, vorgelegt vom IGB, January 1928', G152/3, Collection Schweizerischer Gewerkschaftsbund, Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv, Zurich, Switzerland. The report did not give more specific information about the figures quoted.

32 Elise Zimmern, *International Council of Women. Biennial Report, 1925–1927* [trilingual]. Retrieved from: Kathryn Kish Sklar, and Thomas Dublin, eds. Database 'Women and Social Movements, International. 1840 to Present' (Alexander Street Press), 369–71; 'Fragebogen, October 2, 1927', WN 1000/5/01, jacket 1, ILOA; Martha Mundt to Elisabeth Altmann-Gottheimer, 14 October 1927, and attachments, WN 1000/5/01, jacket 1, ILOA.

proposed a minimum wage Recommendation (accompanying the planned Convention) which would state that in setting minimum wage standards ‘the wage fixing body should in any case take account of the necessity of enabling the workers concerned to maintain a suitable [in the ILO constitution: ‘reasonable’] standard of living; for this purpose regard should primarily be had to the rates of wages being paid for similar work’ covered by ‘effective collective agreements’ in place, or to ‘the general level of wages prevailing’ in the given area.³³ None of this ruled out, of course, the setting of gender-differentiated wages – to the contrary: since, in collective agreements and beyond, wages in many countries were systematically set in a gender-differentiated manner (including for piece rates), the wording the Office suggested implied that the new ILO instruments would indirectly endorse internationally these practices so ubiquitously present around the world. In turn, the planned ILO instruments would miss the opportunity to make a case *against* such gendered practices – something it, in principle, had the power to do, if it *explicitly* included in its international instruments on minimum wages reference to the principle of ‘equal remuneration for work of equal value’, which was similarly enshrined in its constitution.

By the time the ILC convened in 1928, legal equality feminists and other actors, including the International Labour Office, had fully grasped both the danger and the opportunity regarding the international non/pursuance of equal pay policies encapsulated in this state of affairs. Allies of the future ODI submitted a memorandum to the ILC delegates calling for the explicit inscription of the equal pay principle, as enshrined in the 1919 ILO constitution, in the proposed Convention on minimum wages and the accompanying Recommendation. The argument went as follows. Firstly, if the principle of equal pay was not applied in the planned Convention, there was a danger that the ‘injustice’ of fixing unequal minimum wages for women and men would ‘be perpetuated and extended’ – to the international level. Mention was also made of the danger of setting minimum wages for women workers alone. Secondly, it was ‘essential’, argued the legal equality feminists, ‘to recognize that there is a cruel but very prevalent convention that a suitable standard of living for a woman is a standard far below that deemed the minimum standard for a man.’ If the ILC failed to invoke the principle of equal pay in the

33 ILC. *Eleventh Session. Geneva, May 1928. Report on Minimum Wage-Fixing Machinery* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1928), esp. 108, 147–48. In the presentation of the answers of the governments to the questionnaire there was no reference to gender-differentiated wage setting either; several governments had expressed a preference for the living wage as a base.

Recommendation, then 'its work ... must result in an international standardization, by law, of those unequal rates of pay which perpetuate and lead to a disgraceful standard of living for women workers as compared with men.'³⁴ Reporting to its own constituency, the British Open Door Council (a core branch of the future ODI) clarified further what was, from its perspective, fundamentally at stake. With the ILO's minimum wage initiative, 'the moment had come' for the 'great principle of wage equality to be incorporated in an international instrument, and thus set the standard for all countries accepting the Convention.'³⁵ The Open Door Council did much to mobilise public opinion for its initiative.³⁶

As the ILC went into session in 1928, there was a de facto coalition of delegates (and advisors) who aimed to pressure the ILO to affirm the equal pay principle in the planned instruments. Both Eugenia Waśniewska, who served as advisor to the Polish workers' delegate, and the Indian workers' delegate Chaman Lall were instrumental in this regard. Waśniewska, a member of the Polish parliament, was a feminist activist who later would advocate for better representation of women and enhanced knowledge production on issues of women's work within the International Labour Office. In the 1928 conference committee, which prepared plenary decision-making, both representatives demanded the insertion of a reference to the equal pay principle into the Convention itself. Waśniewska argued that in the 'first attempt' in history 'of the Conference to deal with the question of wages ... a serious attempt should be made to remedy' the 'great social injustice' of differentiation between men's and women's wages. Several committee members instantly advised that the motions be withdrawn, as they jeopardised achieving the majority needed to pass the Convention in the Plenum; instead, they wanted to see a relevant passage inserted into the planned Recommendation.³⁷ Among this group of 'moderators' was the committee representative who was Margaret Bondfield's substitute at the relevant session; at the 1928 session of the ILC, Bondfield – for many years an ally of the IFTU women – served as advisor to the British labour delegate. Several amendments were admitted to the desired end. The Irish labour

34 'Draft Convention and Draft Recommendation on Minimum Wage Fixing Machinery ... Statement of the Open Door Council [and Other Organizations]', Elizabeth Abbott to Director of the International Labour Office, 30 May 1928, D 611/2010/01, ILOA.

35 Open Door Council. *Second Annual Report 1928/1929*, 4, 5ODC, LSE-WL.

36 See the many letters to the Director of the International Labour Office in support of ILO action regarding equal pay in ILOA D 611/2010/02.

37 'ILC. Eleventh Session. Committee on Minimum Wage Fixing Machinery. Minutes of Sixth Sitting, June 6, 1928', D 611/900/1, ILOA.

representative Luke J. Duffy wished to see the Recommendation stipulate that the principle of equal pay for equal work ‘in every case be the guiding principle of the wage fixing body.’³⁸ Such strong wording again encountered severe resistance. Eventually, a much watered-down version was agreed upon, which simply placed the equal pay principle as contained in the ILO’s 1919 constitution in a separate Part B of the proposed Recommendation. This additional Part B thus stated that the ILO ‘thinks it right to call the attention of Governments to the principle expressed in Article 427 of the Peace Treaty that men and women should receive equal remuneration for work of equal value.’ This version, adopted by the conference committee with no dissenting votes, made it – unaltered – through the ILC plenum, where women’s rights activist and factory inspector Betzy Kjelsberg supported the case.³⁹

What looked like, and in a sense indeed was, a feeble compromise was also a breakthrough in international politics concerning equal pay, which in a sense came about as a side effect of the ILO’s engagement with minimum wage policies. The decision established a direct link between minimum wage-making, and thus (potential) class progress on the labour market and the equal pay principle. Feminist proponents of a legal equality agenda demanded the linking of regulations regarding minimum wage ‘machineries’ to rule out the possibility that these new international policies would lend additional weight or legitimacy to the politics of unequal pay. For others the goal was to link pro-working class wage policies to a gender wage equality agenda. As a result of these combined interventions, with its 1928 decision the ILO – as the key institution driving the international politics of women’s work – formally reaffirmed, for the first time since 1919, its commitment to equal pay for equal work. It did so in a concrete policy context, namely within a new instrument on minimum wages, in which this commitment would potentially attain a high degree of practical policy relevance.

The debates during the 1928 ILC session (not fully discussed here) spoke volumes about how deeply the principle, and perhaps even more so the practice, of unequal pay was embedded in existing wage systems. Workers’, employers’, and state representatives at the ILC, including dedicated women trade unionists, commanded a mass of additional knowledge – not evoked in the formal documentation of the proceedings – concerning these practices.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Women’s rights activist and factory inspector Betzy Kjelsberg supported the case in the plenum. ‘ILC. Eleventh Session. Committee on Minimum Wage Fixing Machinery. Minutes of Thirteenth Sitting, June 11, 1928’, ILOA D 611/900/1, ILOA; *ILC. Eleventh Session. Geneva, 1928. Record of Proceedings, Volume 1* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1928), 402, 441–46.

Against this background, the inclusion of Part B in Recommendation R30, which overruled the option of an international template on minimum wage policy that would have been silent about and thus tacitly sanctioned the practice of unequal pay for women and men, constituted a crucial historical turning point in the emerging international policies on the minimum wage and equal pay. The ILO's 1928 decision-making meant that, in the future, interested parties could invoke the ILO-made international template conjoining minimum wage policies with the principle of equal pay to counteract sex inequality in the setting of minimum wages. This was of relevance concerning not only international but also domestic wage policies and legislation. Once a country ratified ILO Convention C26 on 'minimum wage-fixing machineries', and then implemented it into national law or took other decisions on minimum wage policy, the accompanying Recommendation R30 could be invoked to delegitimise gender-differentiated minimum wages.

6 The ILO Negotiates (Nonsocialist) Feminist Demands After the 1928 Decision

Ensuing developments soon confirmed the fact that the events at the ILO in 1928 constituted a breakthrough of practical relevance for the history of the struggle for gender wage justice. Contemporary actors differed widely in their assessment of the compromise reached at the ILO. Depending on their standpoint, women's networks deemed the results of 1928 as offering either a chance or a danger. On the one hand, the ILO instruments generated new opportunities to promote equal pay internationally and within individual countries. On the other hand, not least because the equal pay principle was not enshrined in the new ILO Convention itself, sex-differentiated minimum wages in ratifying countries were not ruled out. According to some, the new minimum wage policy template of the ILO could still be used to legitimise the continued existence of unequal pay.

This historically new constellation served as one trigger for significantly intensified international activities within the women's networks of socialist women (discussed in the following section) and nonsocialist women concerned with women's work. In parallel, the IAW now attempted a new strategy of 'constructive work' with the ILO,⁴⁰ aiming both to counteract what

⁴⁰ References in this and the following two paragraphs are from *International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship. Report of the Eleventh Congress. Berlin June 17th to 22nd, 1929*, 92–93, 191, 193–95, 312–13. Unlikely as it might appear, in 1929 IFTU

it considered serious deficiencies of ILO decision-making and to use the new instruments to encourage a proactive, internationally orchestrated policy of equal pay. For the IAW, the fact that equal pay was not mentioned in the ILO Convention itself entailed the danger that the principle would be ‘forgotten’ when governments, having ratified the Convention, drafted the legislation necessary for its application. ILO Recommendations were, after all, non-binding. The IAW instructed its branches within individual countries to ‘most earnestly’ approach their governments to ensure that ‘under legislation arising out of the new ILO Convention ‘there shall not be fixed a different minimum wage for men and women’. Another resolution called on the branches to ‘urge’ governments or ‘representative professional associations’ to demand that the ILO initiate a policy process that would lead to a separate, full-fledged international convention on equal pay.

The IAW also sought to bring about eminently practical policy steps in the international arena. During a personal interview with Albert Thomas, IAW representatives suggested that the International Labour Office implement two measures. First, ratifying countries should be asked ‘to state in the annual reports’ on the working of the Convention – these reports constituted an obligation once an ILO Convention was accepted – ‘whether the principle of equal pay recommended to them by the Conference has been applied in their country, and if not what [were] the differences between men’s and women’s wages. This would allow the collection of definite information ... on which to base protests to any Government on its failure to observe’ Part B of the Recommendation.⁴¹ The second suggestion concerned (hoped-for) ILO action to ensure that, when applicable, women’s associations ‘specially concerned with labour questions’ would be ‘consulted by the competent authorities before applying the methods for fixing minimum wages’.

Committee member Gertrud Hanna figured as an ‘Expert Member’, attached to the regular member representing Germany, of the IAW Committee for Like Conditions of Work for Men and Women; whether or how Hanna might have been involved in IAW policy-making in this period deserves further investigation.

- 41 In fact, however, governments could decide not to align with the Recommendation while ratifying the Convention. The IAW’s proposition in this sense drew on what today would be called the soft power of international governance. The IAW argued that equal pay itself constituted a ‘method’ of fixing minimum wages (and thus could have been inscribed into the Convention itself) whereas for the International Labour Office equal pay had to do with ‘fix[ing] ... rates’. By 1929 tensions between the IAW and the Office were once again tangible. *IAW. Eleventh Congress*, 91–92, 194; *League of Nations. ILC. Twelfth Session. Geneva, 1929. Report of the Director Presented to the Conference* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1929), 2:68–70; *League of Nations. ILC. Fourteenth Session. Geneva, 1930. Report of the Director, First Part* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1930), 66.

To its own, feminist community, the IAW reported that Thomas ‘informed us that in principle he saw no difficulty in complying with these requests’. Such optimistic reporting about the exchange in fact ignored key political realities at the ILO. Here, policy processes were not only complex but also deeply shaped by delicate power relations and balances between the International Labour Office and the ILO members (states and empires) as represented by government, employer and worker representatives. Even if the Office tried to pursue the steps the IAW suggested, practical implementation of these demands here would certainly face resistance and grave difficulties.

The ODI, the new international women’s organisation which intransigently pursued a programme of legal equality between the sexes in international (and national) labour law, was fully aware of the global norm-setting power of international labour legislation. While the ILO was ‘able to injure women’s economic status’ – and indeed, so the ODI held, it steadily did so with policies of women-specific labour legislation – it ‘was also in a position to do definite constructive work to improve’ this status.⁴² The ODI therefore called on the ILO to internationally act on the equal pay principle in a definite manner. At its founding conference in June 1929, the ODI decided to legally challenge the ILO’s 1928 decision. It wanted the Permanent Court of International Justice to rule whether ‘legislation passed to implement the Convention’ in any country could ‘set up’ machineries that might fix sex-specific minimum rates and, if not, whether the ILO was ‘competent to adopt a Convention’ on the question of minimum wages ‘not based on the equal pay principle of the Peace Treaties’, that is, the ILO constitution.⁴³ The ODI also demanded that the ILO adopt an equal pay Convention, and decided ‘to draft’ its own ‘Equal Pay Convention’ to be adopted by the ILC ‘and ratified by all States Members of the I.L.O.’⁴⁴

Following up on the 1927/1928 events, the ODI template for an international equal pay convention explicitly connected the questions of equal pay and minimum wage policies. The template prescribed that ratifying states ensure that public and private employers ‘shall pay to a woman in any branch or grade of any branch of its employment the same rate of wages as it pays to a man in the same branch or grade’. The draft also demanded equality in

⁴² Ibid., 19.

⁴³ Draft Letter to Delegates to the Assembly of the League of Nations, Elizabeth Abbott and Others, 10 September 1928, D 611/2010/01, ILOA; *The Open Door* 1 (1) (1929), 3.

⁴⁴ *The Open Door* 1 (4) (1930), 13.

vocational training and equal insurance benefits and contributions.⁴⁵ The ODI wanted the ILO to complement the weak and nonbinding link between minimum wages and equal pay in the 1928 compromise decision with a separate full-scale – and thus, if ratified, binding – international instrument that would inseparably yoke together the two issues. The ODI did not engage with class-based issues relating to the level of, or the ‘bases’ for establishing, minimum wages. It prioritised legal equality in labour law over questions of class progress.

In 1932 the ODI conveyed to the International Labour Office its ‘suggested draft’ of an ILO convention.⁴⁶ By that time, the organisation had also requested the Office to orchestrate, via the ILO’s newly established Correspondence Committee on Women’s Work, ‘an enquiry as to the position of women relatively to that of men, and a study of trade union customs which affect the pay and status of the women worker in order to improve that pay and status’.⁴⁷ The ODI, in other words, asked for an international inquiry which would collect information not only about existing legal regulations, but also on wage settlements between employers and trade unions or, more precisely, on ‘[t]rade union rule or agreement’ regarding gendered wage difference.⁴⁸ Publicly, too, the ODI repeatedly singled out the trade unions as key actors perpetuating unequal pay.

7 The ILO and the IFTU Women Move Forward After the 1928 Decisions

The position of the IFTU women differed from that of the women’s networks discussed so far. In the ILC conference committee in 1928, workers’ representatives, among them Margaret Bondfield’s substitute, had played an important role in watering down those initial initiatives which aimed at a strong commitment to equal pay in the Convention itself. They tended to align with those political forces in the International Labour Office who prioritised what they considered a responsible and gradualist approach that took into

45 The draft convention referenced here would be amended before adoption at the ODI conference in Stockholm in 1931. *The Open Door* 2 (2) (1931); Open Door Council. *Sixth Annual Report 1931–1932*, 6, 5ODC, LSE-WL.

46 ODI to Chairman of the Governing Body, incl. attachments, 8 January 1932, WN 1001/0, jacket 2, ILOA.

47 ODI (Edith Rodgers) to Ernest Mahaim, 15 January 1932, WN 1001/0, jacket 2, ILOA.

48 ODI to Chairman Governing Body, 5 April 1932, WN 1001/0, jacket 2, ILOA.

consideration duly and in (what they judged to be) a realistic manner the balance of political forces at the ILO. Retrospectively, Martha Mundt of the International Labour Office aptly summarised this perspective when she argued that any more radical course of action would have produced the 'sure wreckage' of the minimum wage Convention in the 1928 ILC plenary.⁴⁹ The fact that the IFTU was a key representative of workers' interests within the ILO, on the one hand, and that IFTU women had limited influence within the IFTU, on the other, also impacted on the IFTU women's course of action. Within the trade union circles affiliated with the IFTU, the nominal commitment to equal pay was combined with de facto ambiguity and sometimes open hostility regarding a proactive policy of equal pay.

The IFTU women responded in a proactive manner to both the ILO's new minimum wage policies and the feminist and feminist-labourist initiatives aimed at moving forward the equal pay agenda internationally, yet they repeatedly also confronted their limited room for manoeuvre within the IFTU-aligned trade union world. Soon after the ILO's decision-making on minimum wages, the IFTU women became more outspoken about problem zones of inherited trade union politics. Their debates moved in the direction of discussing complex practical problems related to equal pay, including definitions and measurement of unequal wages, and they became more outspoken about equal pay while insisting on the consideration of working-class women's unpaid family labour as a key policy issue.

In 1929, in a detailed presentation to the IFTU Women's Committee, Gertrud Hanna asserted that the 'trade unions of all countries stand for the principle of "equal pay for equal work". But my own experience is that nothing is ever done to carry out this principle. It is a mere catchword.'⁵⁰ The IFTU Women's Committee now adopted a resolution which in utter clarity stated that '[i]n most cases the principle, "Equal Pay for Equal Work," although officially recognized, is not applied.'⁵¹ Although the resolution, unlike Hanna's presentation, did not explicitly identify the unions' share of responsibility for this state of affairs – a strategy the IFTU women often pursued when adopting condensed resolutions or decisions – it marked a political departure. The IFTU women explicitly identified, within the international public sphere of socialist trade unionism, wage discrimination against women as a ubiquitous fact of life, and their action addressed the need for trade unions to act more

49 Martha Mundt to Mollie Ray Carroll, 9 November 1928, D 611/2010/02, ILOA.

50 'TUC General Council. Meeting of the International Committee of Trade Union Women, Memorandum Hanna', 11 June 1929, MSS.292/62.14/5, UW-MRC-TUC.

51 *Press Reports of the IFTU* (49) (1929), 2.

decisively. The IFTU leadership, after consulting its national branches, endorsed the resolution in January 1930.⁵²

In the 1930s, the IFTU women became involved in (the early stages of) preparatory work for an equal pay convention which took place within the International Labour Office. Whereas their 1929 resolution addressed the nexus between the struggle against women's low wages and the demand for equal pay for equal work only in general terms, they discussed this nexus in detail at the IFTU's International Trade Union Women's Conference taking place in Brussels in 1933. The British trade unionist and member of the IFTU Women's Committee Julia Varley argued that 'the appearance of something inferior in the industrial labour of women compared with that of men' was because entrepreneurs exchanged male labour for lower-paid female labour in the course of replacing skilled labour with less skilled labour. Moreover, the term "unskilled" labour in industrial processes' was misleading: 'Let anyone unused to it try to perform the most unskilled form of labour that can be thought of, and see how he or she will get on with it!' Women were also paid less even if they performed the same work as men.⁵³

In its final resolution, the Brussels conference in one sense came close to the argument that had informed the letter from the South Hackney socialist women in 1928. 'In view of the economic situation', the resolution read, 'which, as a result of rationalization and lower wages for women, leads to the lowering of the wage level and to increased unemployment, the Conference expresses anew its will to enforce the principle of equal pay for equal work, since the implementation of this principle is likely to eliminate the contrast between lower and better paid work, which at present has the character of a struggle between the sexes in the labour market.'⁵⁴ Yet the resolution also involved a different thrust. With its full focus on the intimate connection between improving the (class) status of both women and men on the labour

52 Johannes Sassenbach to National Centres, 26 November 1929, MSS.292/62.14/5, UW-MRC-TUC; *Press Reports of the IFTU* (5) (1930), 2.

53 Varley's report is from 1931, but discussion and decision-making happened in 1933. 'TUC General Council. International Committee of Trade Union Women, Lausanne, June 7, 1931, Payment of Women's Work [author: Julia Varley]', MSS.292/62.14/6, UW-MRC-TUC; *Kongress Brüssel 1933. Tätigkeit und Bestrebungen des IGB 1930-1932* (Paris: IGB, 1934), 319-24.

54 The quote is taken from the draft resolution which is identical with the final resolution. 'Internationale Gewerkschaftliche Frauenkonferenz, Brussels, July 28-29, 1933. Resolutionsentwurf über die Lohnarbeit der Frau', no. 127, IFTU-IISH. The IFTU endorsed the resolution only in September 1933. *Kongress Brüssel 1933*, 319-24, 428; *Die Internationale Gewerkschaftsbewegung* 13 (7-12) (1933), 5-6.

market and wage equality between women and men, the resolution did not connect the demand for equal pay with the implicit prioritisation of men's employment which could be found in the South Hackney statement. In the midst of severe economic crisis, the question of working-class women's choice to withdraw from the labour market, while invoked in Anna Boschek's statement quoted above, did not find its way into the resolution.

By the middle of the 1930s, the IFTU women considered it 'absolutely essential that the campaign in favour of equal pay for equal work ... initiated by the 1933' IFTU women's conference 'should have the widest possible extension and publicity in order that an equal living wage may be obtained for all.'⁵⁵ The IFTU's 1936 women's conference wanted the IFTU Women's Committee to 'undertake an enquiry among the Women's Sections of all affiliated and sympathetic organisations' about their policy on equal pay.⁵⁶ The end result, however, was a resolution, endorsed by the IFTU Executive Committee, which instead called on the IFTU's national branches to conduct the inquiry. The alteration clearly signalled the intention and the power of the IFTU leadership and the leaders of the national branches to maintain control over the course of action and the IFTU women's initiative. Still, the inquiry thus programmed was to identify modes of 'propaganda' for equal pay, the '[e]xtent of support given by men fellow workers', results in terms of 'the organization of women', and 'further opportunities' identified during the campaign.⁵⁷

In parallel, the IFTU women in 1936 committed publicly and unequivocally to the rejection of minimum wages set in a gender-differentiated manner. The 1936 resolution of the IFTU women's conference urgently appealed to all working women to work most vigorously, through the trade unions, 'for equal minimum wages [gleiche Mindestlöhne] for men and women'.⁵⁸ The discussion during the conference showed that among the IFTU women there was still no clear agreement on rejecting women-specific minimum wages.⁵⁹

The International Labour Office at the time was conducting its own major survey on issues of women's work, placing significant emphasis on the wage question. Marguerite Thibert, the responsible official within the Office, was

55 *Congress London 1936. The Activities of the IFTU 1933–1935* (Paris: IFTU), 369.

56 International Conference of Women Trade Unionists. Holborn Restaurant, London, June 1936, Resolution, MSS.292/62.14/7, UW-MRC-TUC.

57 *Congress London 1936*, 368–69.

58 The above is the exact translation of the German text of the resolution into English. The English original reads 'same rates of wages for men and women'. *Kongress London 1936. Tätigkeit und Bestrebungen des IGB 1933–1935*, 404; *Congress London*, 369.

59 *Ibid.*, 361–66.

present at the IFTU women's 1936 conference, asking for co-operation and support. Her request was very positively received, as the IFTU Women's Committee had, so the official conference record stated, 'long awaited an opportunity of taking part in the work of the ILO' (2024).⁶⁰ The Office initiative showcased the shift from demanding equal pay in the abstract to a concrete international policy of equal pay – as was palpable at the time in the activities of both nonsocialist and socialist women's networks as well – and also invoked the question of unpaid family labour. The idea of a full-scale ILO instrument on equal pay lurked behind the initiative spearheaded within the Office by Marguerite Thibert. Thibert reported to the IFTU women on a questionnaire developed in the Office, and designed for wide distribution, which was to compile information about those real gender wage gaps that could not be justified by any of the usual arguments. It dealt with '[c]omparative rates of wages and salaries of men and women in industries and occupations in which gainfully employed persons of both sexes are engaged in similar work'⁶¹ and 'the family obligations borne by women'.⁶² Thibert explained to the IFTU women that the Office also wished to accumulate 'collective agreements' to be able to compare 'the collective agreement rates for men and women workers'.⁶³ This of course was a task that would involve the trade unions in the first place, since, quite simply, the unions, as partners to collective wage agreements, kept and could provide copies of these agreements. The IFTU women planned to call on the IFTU leadership to forward the questionnaire prepared by the International Labour Office to the affiliated national branches for processing.⁶⁴

The combined interest in un/equal wages and 'family obligations borne by women' in the Office questionnaire indicates that Thibert and her co-workers deliberately engaged with the connections between unequal pay and the living wage.⁶⁵ Systematically uncovering women's 'family obligations' would set the stage for envisioning gender-neutral minimum or living wage standards that accounted for both women's and men's financial responsibility for dependants.

60 Ibid., 368.

61 'For the Meeting of the International Committee of Trade Union Women, July 30, 1937. Campaign for the Practical Realisation of Equal Pay for Equal Work. Anne Loughlin', MSS.292/62.14/8, UW-MRC-TUC.

62 *Congress London*, 367–68.

63 *Congress London*, 367–68.

64 Ibid., 369.

65 The questions about women's family obligations were connected to other interests too.

The commitment of the IFTU women to bring about the participation of IFTU-aligned trade unions in the survey planned by the International Labour Office led to tension with the dominant forces within the IFTU. The women wanted the IFTU and its national branches to proactively participate in a detailed ILO survey on gendered wage inequality which would reveal trade union involvement in producing and reproducing unequal pay. In 1937/1938, the IFTU ultimately refused the request. Summarising the position of its national branches (and implying that the International Labour Office was not able to conduct the survey on its own) the IFTU leadership succinctly remarked that 'where the ILO has failed the Trade Unions are not able to do better'.⁶⁶

At this point, at the latest, it was clear that there would be no support from the IFTU for any of the activities demanded by the Women's Committee since 1933 in the matter of tangible action for equal pay for equal work and equal minimum wages. The IFTU did not authorise the IFTU women to mobilise the vast institutional resources of the IFTU and its national branches for the project of preparing an ILO instrument on equal pay. What remained was the alliance between the officials responsible within the International Labour Office for women's politics, and the IFTU women's International.

8 Conclusion

This article has shown that in the interwar period the internationalisation of the minimum wage question through the initiative of the ILO came to function as a turning point in the international politics of women's wages. The events of 1927/1928 constitute an often-overlooked breakthrough in the gendered history of the politics of the minimum wage and equal pay, and sparked important further international developments.⁶⁷ The political strategies of linking and delinking gender- and class-related demands were at the core of the international debates and policy interactions around the ILO's emerging minimum wage policies. Ideas about women's unpaid work and the gendered divisions of labour within working-class communities informed the debates of activist women, including within the International Labour Office, on the politics of women's wages.

66 'For the IFTU Executive Meeting, January 12–13, 1938. Report on the resolutions proposed by the International Committee of Trade Union Women', MSS.292/62.14/3, UW-MRC-TUC.

67 At the ILO, the status of the principles of the living wage and that of equal pay were equalised when in 1946 the latter was inserted into a revised 'Preamble' which now opened the ILO constitution as a whole. See also the text before fn. 15 above.

In 1919, both labour and women's networks entertained far-reaching hopes regarding the setting of international wage standards by the ILO. At this point, and throughout the interwar period, the leadership of the mainstream and men-dominated international trade union movement kept the demand for international (minimum) wage standards separate from the demand for equal pay. The IFTU repeatedly pressured the ILO regarding the former demand and played an important role in triggering the ILO's minimum wage-fixing machinery policy. By contrast, not until the 1939 session of the ILC would representatives of the IFTU formally demand that the ILO establish a Convention on equal pay. In line with the argument presented in the ILO study *The Law and Women's Work* (published in 1938 and 1939 in French and English, respectively), they emphasised the need to combine the policy of equal pay for equal work with increasing women's wages. Retrospectively, the International Co-operative Women's Guild claimed to have encouraged the IFTU representatives to initiate this action. By the time the 1939 session of the ILC convened, studies conducted within the International Labour Office in preparation of a future equal pay convention had been 'suspended owing to the necessity of facing other urgent tasks'.⁶⁸

In the interwar period, the international women's networks, which included socialist and nonsocialist women, as well as trade union women both aligned and non-aligned with IFTU trade unionism, were far from united regarding the politics of women's wages. While they were agreed in principle in the criticism of unequal pay and women's low wages, they differed regarding both political strategy and the relationship between the minimum wage policies and equal pay. IFTU women trade unionists were well acquainted with gradualism and compromise (which characterised policy-making within the ILO), commanded detailed knowledge about the complex realities and practices of wage-making on the ground, and knew about their own limited room of manoeuvre within the IFTU. For some, raising women's wages – a vision that combined class progress in the labour market with narrowing the gender gap in wage-making, and which could be translated into many practical steps including the introduction and raising of minimum wages – enjoyed *de facto* priority over abstract dogmas of equal pay. Many of them regarded the raising of women's wages as a precondition for raising the overall wage level, which in

68 Marguerite Thibert to Nancy Adam, March 9, 1939, MSS.292/822/3a, UW-MRC-TUC; 'International Co-operative Women's Guild. Report of the Committee 1937-1946', 12, Records of the International Co-operative Women's Guild 3/9, Hull City Council und University of Hull Hull, History Centre, United Kingdom; Zimmermann, *Frauenpolitik*, 293-95.

turn would also give working-class women a chance to decide whether or not to engage with paid work beyond their unpaid family labour.

In 1928, the equal pay doctrine made it into an international labour standard for a first time. This innovation took place in intimate connection with the – eminently gendered and gender-relevant – question of the minimum wage. When from the middle of the 1920s onwards the ILO set out to prepare and generate its first international template for minimum wage policies, in line with its constitutional commitment to living wages, two things happened in parallel. For one thing, the consideration of possible reference points for determining the level of minimum wages (quantification in absolute numbers was never envisioned), an issue which in terms of class progress in the labour market was decisive, was reduced to a non-binding Recommendation and thus separated from the Convention that formed the core of the new international minimum wage template. For another thing, representatives of labour and labour women present at the ILC as well as equal rights feminists addressing the ILO from the outside recognised the political opportunities and dangers associated with the internationalisation of the question of un/equal pay as the ILO moved towards action on minimum wages. All these actors aimed to enshrine a commitment to equal wages for women and men in international labour law. Their motivation was twofold. They wished to prevent an international endorsement – either unspoken or express – of ongoing practices of unequal minimum wages in many lands. They also hoped to capture the political opportunity provided by the ILO's first engagement with an international instrument on wage policies to internationalise the equal pay principle.

Within an ILO-produced policy context that centred on the question of minimum wage-fixing machineries, feminists dedicated to policies of legal equality between the sexes played an important role in prompting the advances towards the internationalisation of minimum wage policies. IFTU-aligned women trade unionists, who were closely allied with the officials responsible for questions of women's work within the International Labour Office, expressed more measured support for the equal pay initiatives in connection with the ILO's emerging minimum wage policies.

The decade following ILO decision-making on minimum wage policies saw increasing and greatly enriched international activity regarding minimum wages and equal pay. Legal equality feminists put pressure on the ILO to act on the equal pay principle in a less ambiguous and more straightforward manner. Women's organisations, in response to and following up on the interactions around the ILO's minimum wage initiative, urged the International Labour Office to internationally oversee and influence wage regulation and practices in many lands. Women's organisations, IFTU women trade

unionists, and women officials attached to the Office engaged in large-scale and – inevitably – complex knowledge production and inquiry as indispensable preconditions for future international action. The responsible ILO officials, supported by the IFTU women, aimed to make sure that working-class women's responsibilities for unpaid care work would duly be taken into consideration when developing an international politics of equal pay, including gender-equal minimum wages. Within their own circles, IFTU women trade unionists, in response both to these developments and to rising political tensions resulting from increased gendered wage competition during the world economic crisis, finally committed to a proactive politics that combined the demands for minimum wages and for equal pay, encountering fierce resistance from their fellow men trade unionists.

Further research should be done on the character and evolution of the international politics of women's wages during the later 1930s and the 1940s, the period concluding with the adoption of the ILO Equal Remuneration Convention (No. 100, 1951). We have only begun to develop a full historical understanding of the political contestations surrounding the entanglements between minimum wages, equal pay, raising women's wages, and considering women's unpaid work during this period.

Funding

This work was supported by European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (833691 - ZARAH).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dorothy Sue Cobble and Jenny Jansson for their stimulating comments on initial drafts, and the anonymous reviewers for inspiring remarks. The article, considering additional material and actors, develops argument in part introduced in my earlier work. Translations into English are mine.

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