

Interuniversitaire Master in Gender en Diversiteit

Academiejaar 2016-2017

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Gender Equality in Intersectoral Social Dialogue: Past Achievements and Future Challenges for Equality Bargaining in Belgian industrial relations

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Masterproef voorgelegd tot het behalen van de graad van Master in Gender en Diversiteit

Wordcount: 26.322 (zonder voetnoten, bibliografie en bijlagen)

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Dankwoord

Deze masterproef is het eindpunt van een intensief leerproces van twee jaar. Ik dank alle docenten voor de talrijke denkkaders die zij hebben aangereikt, de zeer interessante leerstof, het aanzetten tot zelfreflectie, de inspiratie,... De interdisciplinaire opzet van de master Gender en Diversiteit heb ik als een grote meerwaarde ervaren.

Mijn dank gaat in het bijzonder naar mijn promotor, Prof. Dr. Patrizia Zaroni, voor de leerrijke discussies, de aanmoediging om steeds weer grenzen te verleggen en nieuwe inzichten op te doen, zowel methodologisch als inhoudelijk.

Dit was mijn eerste ervaring met kwalitatief onderzoek en het afnemen van diepte-interviews, het was telkens een zeer boeiende ervaring om diepgaand met een 'expert' een gesprek te voeren over het onderwerp van mijn masterproef. Ik kreeg vaak ook vele tips, opmerkingen en reflecties die me sterk geholpen bij dit onderzoek. Ik dank van harte alle respondenten voor hun tijd en medewerking. Mijn dank gaat ook naar de steun en vriendschap van collega's en medestanders met wie ik in de voorbije periode van gedachten heb kunnen wisselen.

Tenslotte mijn welgemeende verontschuldiging en dank aan mijn naaste vrienden en familie, voor alle steun en begrip, en in het bijzonder bedank ik mijn echtgenoot en kinderen, voor wie de afgelopen twee jaar soms wel een beproeving is geweest. Het was voor mij niet altijd even gemakkelijk om al die rollen te combineren, maar ik denk dat al deze elementen van het 'gewone' leven: vriendschap, zorg, liefde, geluk en verdriet, zeer inspirerend waren tijdens deze leerzame periode.

Abstract

Gender Equality in Intersectoral Social Dialogue: Past Achievements and Future Challenges for Equality Bargaining in Belgian industrial relations

This qualitative longitudinal study analysis the gender equality provisions of Belgian intersectoral agreements adopted between 1986 until present, using theories and concepts of equality bargaining studies and gendered industrial relations. The goal of this research is to assess how gender equality has been included in Belgian social dialogue, in the period that women have massively entered the labour market. The study distinguishes three periods: a first period, from 1986 until 1996, is characterised by special measures aiming to increase the employment rate of women. A second period starts at the turn of the millennium, with measures tackling the gender pay gap and provisions to improve the work-life balance of both women and men. In 2008, the outbreak of the financial and economic crisis accelerates the trend of wage moderation and budget austerity policies, seriously challenging the equality potential of collective bargaining. The discussion chapter examines the external and internal factors influencing the negotiation process and potential outcomes of national level equality bargaining in a coordinated system of industrial relations. This study concludes by raising some future challenges for equality bargaining in Belgian social dialogue.

Nederlandstalige samenvatting

Gendergelijkheid in de Interprofessionele Akkoorden (1986-2017): Een onderzoek naar het gelijkheidspotentieel van collectief onderhandelen in de Belgische sociale dialoog

Deze kwalitatieve longitudinale studie onderzoekt het gelijkheidspotentieel van de interprofessionele akkoorden in de periode van 1986 tot 2017. De Belgische sociale dialoog wordt vanuit een genderbenadering onderzocht, gebruikmakend van de concepten 'equality bargaining' en theorieën over gegenderde arbeidsrelaties. Dit onderzoek gaat na hoe gendergelijkheid werd opgenomen in de Belgische sociale dialoog, in een periode dat vrouwen massaal toetreden tot de arbeidsmarkt. Er worden drie periodes onderscheiden: een eerste periode, van 1986 tot 1996, is gekenmerkt door 'specifieke maatregelen' die de werkgelegenheidsgraad van vrouwen willen verhogen. Een tweede periode start bij de overgang naar het nieuwe millennium. Er worden maatregelen ingevoerd ter bestrijding van de gender loonkloof en voor een betere balans tussen werk en privé voor zowel vrouwen als mannen. In 2008, als de financiële en economische crisis uitbreekt, versterkt het overheidsbeleid van loonmatiging en budgetbesparingen, waardoor het gelijkheidspotentieel van collectieve onderhandelingen sterk onder druk wordt gezet. In de discussie worden de externe en interne factoren onderzocht die het onderhandelingsproces voor gendergelijkheid beïnvloeden. De studie sluit af met enkele toekomstige uitdagingen voor meer (gender)gelijkheid in de Belgische sociale dialoog.

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Introduction

This qualitative longitudinal study presents the gender equality provisions of Belgian intersectoral agreements concluded between 1986 until present, using theories and concepts of equality bargaining studies and gendered industrial relations. The goal of this research is to assess how gender equality has been included in Belgian social dialogue, in the period that women have massively entered the labour market. The period of study covers three decades: the starting point is 1986, when national social dialogue concludes a new intersectoral agreement after a long period without agreement. The study ends in 2017, when a new intersectoral agreement is reached after a turbulent period of union protests against government reforms and rejected draft agreements. Is national social dialogue capable of promoting a more equal and inclusive labour market in this particularly transformative period?

The labour market has changed profoundly over the last half century. Women have gained wide spread access to employment through the development of the service economy and public services that also supported women in their care roles (Rubery 2015, p642). Women's integration in the labour market has been correlated with high levels of gender segregation, gender pay gaps and the gender divide in domestic responsibilities (Rubery 2015, p634). In Belgium, women's employment rate today has reached 58,1% compared to 37,6% in 1986. They represent now 48,5% of all wage earners, compared to 35,5% in 1986. This increase is however primarily the result of the rise in part-time jobs (FOD Economie 2017a, 2017b). Compared to other EU countries, the Belgian gender pay gap in hourly wages is rather low, reaching 9,9% in 2014 compared to 16,1% in the European Union. However, the gender pay gap in monthly wages is much higher, 19,5% in 2014, reflecting the overrepresentation of Belgian women in part-time work (CRB 2017, p48, IGVM 2017).

National labour market institutions play an important role in regulating labour conditions and equalising pay levels including the gender pay gap (Rubery & Fagan 1995). Countries with greater unionisation densities or with more centralised wage-bargaining systems, such as Belgium, have on average lower rates of income inequality (Cobb 2016, p328, Oskarsson 2005, Aidt & Tzannatos 2002). The high score on centralisation and coordination of the Belgian bargaining system seems atypical in the light of this trend towards decentralisation elsewhere in Europe, however this indicator may obscure the profound transformation of Belgian industrial relations since the mid-1980's (Vilrocx & Van Leemput 1998), when the tradition of national intersectoral agreements resumed. The on-going trend in Europe from centralized to (organized or disorganized) decentralized industrial relations and the inversion of the favourability principle (Keune 2015, p293) is leading to a growing income inequality, a trend that is exacerbated by budget cuts in public services. A study by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) further reports that the economic crisis of 2008 and the following austerity measures implemented by most EU member states have led to a decreasing priority of gender equality in collective bargaining (Pillinger 2014, p6, Briskin 2014a) in a wider context where the social dialogue process itself was already under stress.

Since the large scale Eurofound study in the mid 1990's (Bercusson & Dickens 1996, Dickens 2000), most qualitative research on equality bargaining is concentrated in countries with a decentralised system of collective bargaining, mainly Anglo-Saxon countries (Williamson 2010, Rigby & O'Brien-Smith 2010, Dawson 2014, Berg & Piszczek 2014, Williamson & Baird 2014, Dean 2015). Despite the growing attention to the topic of both income inequality and the gender pay gap since the crisis of 2008, and large institutions such as the ILO and ETUC promoting equality bargaining as a policy instrument (ILO 2016, ETUC 2015), there is no in-depth research on the equality provisions concluded through the intersectoral agreements in Belgian industrial relations. Most Belgian Industrial Relations (IR) research focuses on the topic of wage bargaining in the context of a government imposed 'wage norm' (Boucké & Vandaele 2003, Vandekerckhove & Van Gyes 2012). Previous studies on Belgian IR indicate the detrimental influence of the wage standard on the solidarity potential of national social dialogue (Vilrocx & Van Leemput 1998; Vervecken, Debrulle & Derruine 2008; Pulignano 2012), but it has not yet been assessed in detail how the wage norm has influenced the bargaining agenda related to gender equality provisions. And thus how the transformation of Belgian industrial relations has degraded the possibilities for equality bargaining.

Adopting a gender perspective on collective bargaining and collective agreements (Rubery & Fagan 1995, Dickens 2000, Wajcman 2000), this study aims to analyse how gender equality has been integrated in the content and process of national social dialogue and how it has evolved over the last three decades - from 1986 until the last signature of a new agreement in 2017 - in the light of a profound transformation of Belgian industrial relations but also of European and national policy. In Belgium, every other year, national level social partners start negotiations with the goal of concluding a national cross-sectoral agreement covering all workers of the private sector. This process results in 10 national agreements with varying attention for gender equality issues such as positive actions, child care, pay equality and career leave. The empirical analysis of my research is based on the original texts of the intersectoral agreements signed between 1986 and 2017 and 17 semi-structured interviews with persons involved in the negotiation process of national social dialogue and experts of gender equality in social dialogue.

This study is structured as follows: a first chapter presents the theoretical framework of industrial relations, equality bargaining and previous research on the relation between centralized collective bargaining and (gender) equality. A second chapter introduces the Belgian context of industrial relations and gender equality. The next two chapters depict the research questions and methodology that guided the case study. The fifth chapter presents the findings of the case study in three episodes and constitutes the main body of work. Each period starts by depicting the bargaining context and negotiation process, followed by a presentation and evaluation of the main gender equality provisions. The sixth chapter summarizes the findings of this study in the light of the theoretical framework and discusses the external and internal factors influencing the negotiation process and potential outcomes of national level equality bargaining. Finally, the last chapter concludes by an assessment of

the future challenges of equality bargaining in the light of the transformation of Belgian industrial relations and makes some suggestions for further research.

1. Theoretical framework:

Gender equality in industrial relations and collective bargaining

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework of gendered industrial relations and equality bargaining. The next section presents previous research on the relation between centralized collective bargaining and (gender) equality in the European context. This chapter ends with an overview of qualitative studies examining the process and context of equality bargaining, and how its transformational capacity can be assessed.

A gender perspective on industrial relations

The traditional topics of research in Industrial Relations (IR) are the main collective actors involved in employment relations: employers, trade unions and the state; industrial action such as strike activity, workplace organisation, government intervention, and the process of collective bargaining, with a focus in mainstream research on wage bargaining (European Commission 2011). Trade unions have used collective bargaining with the employer as an instrument for claiming better pay and working conditions for their members, and to obtain a fair workers' share in the profits of capitalist production. This strategy has often been used in relation with other actions such as strikes or political action.

A basic condition for (the equality potential of) collective bargaining is that it depends on a legal framework that secures union organisation and collective bargaining (Dickens 1998, p20). In a global perspective, collective bargaining as the principle means by which terms of employment are set is limited to a small number of industrialized countries, in contrast to most of the countries where collective bargaining is accessible only to a small number of workers (Blackett & Sheppard 2003, p420). From a historical perspective, social dialogue at a national level has been institutionalised in most European welfare states in the period before or after the Second World War (Visser 2016). A second condition for collective bargaining is the willingness of employers to engage in negotiations with trade unions and the existence of multi-employers' organisations in the case of multi-employer bargaining.

In Europe, institutionalised collective bargaining has played an important role in sharing the fruits of productivity more fairly between capital and labour (Van Gyes & Schulten 2015, p11). Despite this class related distributive potential, collective bargaining frameworks are not (gender) equality-neutral. Because unionisation level and strength vary, where historically, male occupied sectors have higher levels of unionisation, this results in differences in bargaining coverage¹ and strength among sectors and occupations leading to

¹ Bargaining coverage is the proportion of employees whose wages are affected by collective wage rates through a collective agreement. Legal regulations on the extension of collective agreements to a wider area of

inequalities in pay and working conditions that disproportionately affecting women and other historically subordinate social groups working in the more weakly organized sectors and jobs (Rubery & Fagan 1995, Kravaritou 1997, pxii, Bercusson & Dickens 1996, p5).

Bargaining coverage is also related to the legal regulation of collective bargaining where multi-employer, sectoral, coordinated or centralised² collective bargaining is considered as reducing differences of pay and working conditions between sectors and occupations (Aidt & Tzannatos 2002, Oskarsson 2005, Van Gyes & Schulten 2015).

Most IR research is still biased towards the Fordist economic model of the male breadwinner, and does not take sufficiently account of the profound transformation and feminisation of the labour market during recent decades (Hansen 2002). Scholars have argued that class as the principal concept to theorize social inequality is no longer sufficient (Kirton & Greene 2005, Danieli 2006) and that a gender or even an intersectional perspective should be incorporated into the analysis of employment relations and the institutions involved in it (Rubery & Fagan 1995, Wajcman 2000; Holgate, Hebson & McBride 2006; Gartzia, Amillano & Baniandrés 2016).

Equality bargaining

Equality bargaining is defined as “the collective negotiation of provisions that are of particular interest or benefit to diverse social groups and are likely to promote equality and diversity at work” (Kirton & Greene 2010, p181). The concept has been introduced mainly as a policy tool/ instrument with the goal of promoting equal opportunities through social dialogue complementing equality legislation on the one hand and business case driven equality initiatives developed by management on the other hand (Dickens 1999). While this literature underscores that collective bargaining can potentially be used to foster equality, it is however acknowledged that the potential of collective bargaining as a mechanism for the achievement of equality should not be taken for granted, as various factors make that it can either perpetuate or challenge inequalities (Bercusson & Dickens 1996, p5).

In recent research, equality bargaining is used as a research concept with the aim of analysing the potential relation between collective bargaining and (gender) equality (Heery 2006, Williamson 2010, Williamson & Baird 2014), and thus further builds on the argument of scholars that have criticized the gender blindness of mainstream industrial relations. The research on equality bargaining can be subdivided in two central questions. A first question concerns the role of trade unions in shaping bargaining agendas and outcomes, intra-union dynamics and the extent to which trade union priorities reflect the increasingly diversified work force in a changing labour market. This question thus focuses on the organisation of

application strongly influence the coverage rate, and it is also closely correlated with the level of employer organisation (European Commission 2015, p28-29, p43).

² Centralisation refers to the ‘relative importance of the various bargaining levels in a given national system’, while coordination relates to ‘relationships between bargaining levels (vertical coordination) or across different bargaining units at the same level (horizontal coordination)’ (European Commission 2015, p43).

trade unions and how this affects collective bargaining. A second question concerns the negotiation process and context, and examines the relation between trade unions, employers and legal regulation. A topic in examination in the European context of welfare states is how growing inequality, declining unionisation and the decentralisation of collective bargaining regimes are mutually related. Centralised and coordinated bargaining regimes are commonly associated with less inequality and in favour of gender equality.

Trade unions and equality bargaining

To varying degrees, trade unions have in the past contributed to the exclusion of women and other groups from employment and protected areas of male privilege (Dickens 1999, p15, Colling & Dickens 1998). Trade unions are gendered organisations, historically centred on white male members working in the manufacturing sectors. This has resulted in male biased trade union agendas and bargaining priorities so that “collective bargaining has often served to perpetuate rather than challenge inequalities”(Dickens 1999, p15).

The feminization of the workforce has given incentives to trade unions to transform themselves adapting to the growing proportion of women in the labour force and in trade union membership. Trade unions play a key role in the bargaining process, as intermediate organizations, in reflecting the concerns and defending the interests of women workers and other groups in the bargaining agenda. Because trade unions are representative structures, this means that this equality function is conditional on the extent to which women and other groups are included in union structures and can exercise power as members to set bargaining agendas. “This raises important questions concerning who is in the union, who has voice and wields power, and the extent to which those who would wish to promote equality action are able to influence the collective bargaining agenda, process and outcomes” (Dickens 1998, p29). Unions are different from employer organizations “in that they are (aspire to be) democratic institutions in relation to employees. This places a particular importance on pressure generated and channelled within the union from ‘below’, i.e. from within the membership” (Dickens 1998, p29).

The research on the functioning of trade unions in relation to equality bargaining has contributed to a better understanding of gendered bargaining processes such as intra-organizational dynamics inside unions that play a role in setting the bargaining agenda, the importance of union leadership, and the role of women constituencies (Parker & Foley 2010, Briskin 2014b, Ledwith 2012, Guillaume 2013, Cristofalo 2014; Britwum, Douglas & Ledwith 2012). For example, studies have demonstrated the relationship of well-organized trade union women constituencies with equality bargaining. These constituency committees can enhance political representation and the power of women workers, essential to organize political pressure for equality bargaining, because “women’s issues are still the first to be dropped at the bargaining table” (Kumar in Briskin 2006, p48). “Considering collective bargaining as a mechanism for the promotion of gender equality is both a catalyst for such transformation and a likely outcome of it” (Dickens 2000, p205-6). This transformation

of unions can however create tensions inside the organisation and trigger active male resistance, in the form of institutional and cultural impediments placed in the way of women (Dickens 2000, p205, Cockburn 1991).

Tensions over bargaining priorities do not solely arise directly from gender issues, but rather reflect differences in bargaining power and strength, which typically overlap with gender. As Burgmann observes in Australia in relation to the decentralization of collective bargaining: *“The tensions that are present in the trade union movement over the issue of enterprise bargaining are not between the left and the right, but between the strong unions and the weak unions. This also mirrors the division between men and women workers. The leaders of the strong, efficient, well-organised traditionally militant unions, like the Metalworkers are not fearful of a move towards enterprise bargaining because they know they can deal with it ... The unions that have most to worry about ... are the conservative non-militant unions, like the Clerks and the Shop Assistants. The workers, of course, who will suffer under these conditions, are women”* (Burgmann 1994 in Briskin 2006, p15).

Centralised collective bargaining and gender equality

Although research on national level equality bargaining in the context of coordinated systems of collective bargaining is scarce, the comparative Eurofound research on equality bargaining in the European Union found that, in general, differentials in pay levels of women and men are narrower in countries with a centralised system of collective bargaining, and wider in those with a decentralised system (Kravaritou 1997, p.xi). The report concluded that *“the idea of equal opportunities as an integral part of collective bargaining must be taken into account at the highest level if pay differentials are to be reduced. That would be a means of curbing the discriminatory function of collective bargaining.”* (Kravaritou 1997, p9) Along the same lines, Weiler observed that *“provisions on pay equity, more than all other equal opportunities issues, are related to the national collective bargaining and industrial relations system and more closely linked to the ‘hard’ issues of collective bargaining. (...) the impact of the development of industrial relations systems in the direction of a more decentralised bargaining system has an impact on gender pay equity and there seems to be evidence of an interrelation between centralisation and decentralisation of industrial relations and a narrowing or widening of pay dispersion”* (Weiler 2000, p217). A more recent Eurofound report on the gender pay gap confirms that gender differences appear to be lower where bargaining is centralised and notices that *“framework or model agreements are often negotiated at higher level, and these seem to play an important role in addressing gender equality issues at the workplace”* (Ponzellini, Aumayr & Wolf 2010, p23). The study however surprisingly concludes by suggesting trade union confederations to *“‘simulate’ some of the advantages of centralised bargaining, by providing common guidelines for gender-sensitive collective bargaining to their respective members at the workplace level”* (Ponzellini et al 2010, p30).

The ETUC 'Bargaining for Equality' survey of 2013 found that "centralised and sectoral bargaining, which has an impact across the whole economy, is the most effective way that unions can implement actions to reduce pay inequalities between women and men. However, the survey also shows that significant progress can be made through company level bargaining." (p9) "The best gender equality outcomes are found where sectoral and company bargaining co-exist" (p27). The study concludes however that "the economic crisis has exacerbated the already strong tendency towards decentralised bargaining" (Pillinger 2014, p9). Another Eurofound (2014) report does not find a clear link between the centralisation of collective bargaining systems (or involvement in tripartite decision-making) and the level of social partner activity on gender equality: "well-developed gender equality activities are reported among social partner organisations in different types of social dialogue systems" (p2, p41). However, it finds a positive link between the score on the Gender Equality index and "a stronger policy framework and more programmes in place at the level of social partner organizations" (p41).

Europeanisation of industrial relations and gender equality

Various European reports on gender equality show that European legislative initiatives have played an agenda-setting role for collective bargaining. For example in relation to sexual harassment and parental leave, although Dickens notes that "some national statutes pre-date European legislation" (Dickens 1998, p22). The issue of reconciliation of work and family life has received increased attention in the European member states, under influence of EC directives and Employment Guidelines, both in collective bargaining arrangements and in legislation (Demetriades et al. 2006, p66). However, this report notes that in the new member states (NMS) "the general thrust [of flexible working] is to provide labour market flexibility rather than to facilitate employees with family or other responsibilities" (p65). Grünell and Schaapman (2004) analysed the implementation of gender mainstreaming in industrial relations, and similarly conclude that "commitment to gender mainstreaming policies is evident in the crucial area of reconciling work and family responsibilities: here, the 'male breadwinner norm' – the traditional labour conditions for a single male breadwinner for a family – is being explicitly questioned" (Grünell 2006, p57).

The principle of equal pay for women and men for equal work was included in the founding document of the European Union (the Treaty of Rome of 1957) and reaffirmed in later policy documents, such as the European Employment Strategy of 2003 aiming "to achieve by 2010 a substantial reduction in the gender pay gap in each Member state" (in Ponzellini et al. 2010, p28). Various reports note that wage equality has mainly been tackled in an indirect way through measures enabling more women to combine work and family life, serving also other purposes, such as the increase of the employment rate of women with children (Nergaard & Soumeli 2002), or sectoral and occupational segregation (Ponzellini et al. 2010,

p2 of p28³). Occasionally, initiatives focus in a more direct way on the wage differences that still exist between women and men, through the revision of job classification systems to detect and eliminate discriminatory pay gaps or wage increases for low-paid occupations and sectors with higher proportions of female employees (Ponzellini et al. 2010, p23, Nergaard & Soumeli 2002).

Moreover, gender equality and the gender pay gap are mostly dealt with through framework agreements negotiated at higher level, multi-employer bargaining and that “examples of single-employer collective bargaining are far less evident” (Ponzellini et al 2010, p23). These agreements are “usually of an ‘intentional’ nature, to be elaborated at sector or company level, or the agreements consist merely of recommendations for lower bargaining levels, affording those levels sufficient leeway to decide whether to follow the national agreement”(Grünell & Schaapman 2004).

Since 1985, cross-sectoral European social dialogue contributes to European social policy, part of ‘European governance’ (Weiler 2013, p13). De Bruijn & Bleijenbergh (2000) contend that this European tendency of including equal opportunities provisions in collective agreements started in the 1980s as part of a neo-liberal political climate that argued for the transfer of regulative governmental power to the social partners (‘governance on distance’) (p262). The European Commission hoped to broaden and deepen equal opportunities policies in comparison with the legislative route (p256-257) by transferring to the social partners much of the responsibility “to implement policies and practices in all the sectors they cover” (p262). The integration of social dialogue in European policy making has continued in subsequent policy declarations such as the European Employment Strategy and the 2000 Lisbon agreement which “emphasises the importance for European economic competitiveness of increasing labour participation” and the growing significance of collective bargaining for gender mainstreaming (Grünell 2006, p50).

European social dialogue has focussed on four key gender equality issues: reconciliation of professional and family life, gender segregation, gender pay gap and violence and harassment at work (Weiler 2013, piii/ p37).

However, since the economic crisis and in the context of growing unemployment and the increase of concession bargaining to protect jobs, gender equality “becomes a luxury to be afforded in ‘good times’ rather than a policy objective on a par with economic growth” (Smith 2012, p377). The ‘automatic’ link between a centralized industrial relations system and gender equality bargaining, through the indicator of the gender pay gap, has recently been questioned (see also Smith 2012⁴). A second conclusion of recent reports relate to the

³ The study finds that “it is often difficult to clearly differentiate between initiatives specifically targeting pay equity and those addressing gender equality in employment in a broader sense – for example, or care responsibilities.” (Ponzellini et al 2010, p2 of p28)

⁴ Mark Smith (2012) warns in his article to not overestimate “the social partner action against the pay gap in more coordinated bargaining regimes, the evidence even here is far from overwhelming and it would be wrong

negative impact of the crisis affecting both collective bargaining priorities and outcomes (less room for equality measures). Political scholars have also deplored the declining importance given to gender equality in European policy, becoming merely symbolic (Jacquot 2015) however this trend predated the financial crisis of 2008 (see Smith & Villa 2010).

Examining the process and context of equality bargaining

Since the large scale Eurofound study in the mid 1990's (Bercusson & Dickens 1996, Dickens 2000), most qualitative research on equality bargaining is concentrated in countries with a decentralised system of collective bargaining, mainly Anglo-Saxon countries. These mainly qualitative case studies on equality bargaining have been conducted in the context of liberal economies with a decentralized system of collective bargaining (Williamson 2010, Rigby & O'Brien-Smith 2010, Dawson 2014, Berg & Piszczek 2014, Williamson & Baird 2014, Dean 2015). It most often develops a thematic focus on the gender pay gap or on work life balance at the level of sectoral or organisational collective bargaining. Relating to methodology, it investigates the process of collective bargaining through its different stages (constitution of union claims, bargaining agenda, negotiation process, and implementation) and contextual inhibitive and facilitating factors.

The study of Milner & Gregory (2014) on equality bargaining in the UK and France compares the equality bargaining process and outcomes in two very different bargaining regimes: the liberal UK versus the dirigiste regime of France, where the role of legislation is more important and collective bargaining is institutionalized (Milner & Gregory 2014). They find that in both countries gender equality has been mainstreamed into national-level union policy. In the UK they observe increased grassroots pressure for equality bargaining due to a continued feminization of union membership, but constrained by structural factors, outcomes of bargaining are patchy, depending on the local bargaining power resources. In the case of France, a legislative framework for equality bargaining has been introduced, however these provisions risk to remain 'empty shells' without effective monitoring and enforcement by the state (Milner & Gregory 2014, p252, p257-8).

Empirical research has uncovered the inhibitive and facilitative factors of equality bargaining by examining the bargaining process and how the political and economic context influences potential outcomes of negotiations (Williamson 2010, Berg & Piszczek 2014). An issue in research is the relationship between trade unions and employers during negotiations, where Dickens notes that "well-established bargaining relationships and an industrial relations style characterized by trust and notions of social partnership [are] being associated with bringing equal opportunity into collective bargaining" (Dickens 1998, pIX). But she further notes that "although equal opportunities may appear as a consensual issue, and be tactically presented as such in bargaining, it can be highly conflictual not only across the bargaining table but also

to build a general argument based solely on these cases"(p376). In the article he argues that EU policy increasingly relies on soft law and action by the social partners in addressing the gender pay gap instead of regulation and governmental action.

within each side” (Dickens 1998 pX). She sees here an important role “in the security and quality of the bargaining relationship” in accommodating and compromising potentially conflicting interests “so that the status quo of inequality is not maintained against the interests of equality” (Dickens 2000, p202).

But employers and trade unions can differ in their interpretations and objectives of equal opportunities. For example Ponzellini et al. (2010, p21) observe that employer organisations “often consider factors external to enterprises as the major causes of the gender pay gap – such as education, occupational segregation and family (...) they attribute the gender pay gap to inequalities arising outside the workplace and falling outside the reach of the company, while possibly underestimating the influence of ‘internal’ factors, such as gender stereotypes and human resource management within enterprises” (Ponzellini et al 2010 p21). Dickens further notes that “employers may attempt to use equality arguments or rhetoric as a way of attacking existing practices secured through negotiation which they may find restrictive”, while unions “may find that hard won practices, seen to protect the general interests of existing members, may appear threatened” when adopting an equality dimension to bargaining (Dickens 2000, p202).

The transformational capacity of equality bargaining

Various authors have tried to identify key aspects of ensuring an effective equality bargaining. Cockburn (1989) speaks about the short and the long agenda, while Williamson (2010) proposes a model of different types of equality bargaining which form a continuum ranging from ‘narrow’ to ‘transformational’ equality bargaining. Blackett & Sheppard identify three key aspects that must be ensured in collective bargaining to pursue substantive equality: a commitment to equality; mechanisms for identifying inequality and discrimination; and creative remedial measures and strategies (2003, p436). The strategy of equality bargaining as defined by Colling and Dickens (1989) comprises three key elements: special measures, gender-proofing and addressing gender disadvantage (see also Briskin 2006).

‘Special’ measures

The most visible kind of equality bargaining is the collective negotiation of provisions of particular interest or benefit to women and/or likely to facilitate gender equality. These ‘special measures’ are readily identified as ‘equality issues’ and often extend beyond the employment sphere (the accepted terrain of collective bargaining), for instance sexual harassment, family/work reconciliation or non-traditional training for women, etc. (Dickens 2000, p201, Colling & Dickens 1998, p405).

Scholars point to two risks in the negotiation of these ‘special’ measures. A first risk is that some of these provisions which at first sight seem to respond to women’s needs, can have a ‘double-edged’ effect for women's equality. For example, flexibility arrangements including part-time schedules, “may be valuable as an aid to combining domestic responsibilities and paid work, thereby facilitating labour market participation, but whether [they] in fact

contribute towards equal opportunities and the reconciliation of work and family life depends very much on the specific terms and conditions of employment and also on the meaning of 'family life'" (Dickens 1998, p12, Bercusson & Dickens 1996, p20-21).

A second challenge is that, while the bargaining agenda is broadened, these women's issues are construed as women's special needs and less as workers' rights (Dickens, 2000), and in the meantime the traditional union operations remain largely unquestioned and continue to reproduce male privilege. Another risk is that "the visibility of separate women's issues is enough to convince many members that women are actually privileged in contemporary collective bargaining, facilitating - a backlash against equity policies". Unions must thus "recognize that, in a gendered world, all issues of collective bargaining are gendered and require scrutiny for differential effects on members" (Creese 1996 in Briskin 2006, p39-40).

Gender-proofing/ mainstreaming

A major challenge of equality bargaining is going beyond 'adding on' women (Dickens 2000, p201) to "include an equality awareness on the part of negotiators in handling commonplace bargaining agenda items". This mainstreaming strategy consists in "identifying the equity implications in all collective agreement provisions" (Briskin 2006, p35). This means that "'Core' negotiating issues such as working time, wage adjustment, flexibility, restructuring, etc, which do not come brandishing an equality label, are of central importance to the promotion of equality" (Dickens 2000, p201). Briskin notes that this process of "recognizing the equity implications in all bargaining issues will depend upon the political struggle to broaden and deepen understandings of equity" (Briskin 2006, p35).

"Gender mainstreaming means integrating the differentiated needs of both men and women in all stages of policy cycle so that the outcome does not perpetuate inequality in terms of rights. Gender mainstreaming implies promoting equality of treatment under the law and equality of opportunity for men and women." (ILO 2016)

Addressing (gender) disadvantage

A third key element of equality bargaining is "the injection of an equality dimension to the negotiation of change, for example reforming a grading structure, restructuring or work reorganisation", which thus comprises addressing gender disadvantage and negotiating innovative provisions (Colling & Dickens 1998, p390, Dickens 1999, p15, Williamson 2010, p247). Transformational bargaining also requires negotiating provisions for other disadvantaged groups apart from female workers (Briskin 2006). This stage can go beyond the formal phase of conclusion of an agreement by involving women workers in its monitoring and implementation (Williamson 2010, p247).

2. Belgian social dialogue and gender equality

This chapter introduces the Belgian context of industrial relations and gender equality in order to situate the case study developed in the next chapter. A first part briefly describes the situation of women on the Belgian labour market, a next part presents the main characteristics of the Belgian system of industrial relations, followed by a brief presentation of the main institutions of national level collective bargaining. I conclude by presenting the characteristics of intersectoral agreements, which will be analysed further in the case study.

Gender equality and the labour market

The Belgian economy and labour market has undergone a profound transformation in the last three decades. The service sector now represents 42% of all jobs, the non-profit sector 36%, and the industrial sector now only counts for 20% of all employment. This transformation of the labour market is accompanied by a growing employment rate of women, now reaching 58,1% (in 2016). The massive entrance of women on the labour market since the 1980's is related to the growth of part-time jobs (from 10% in 1986 to 25% in 2016). Belgium is among the European countries with the highest proportion of women working part-time: 45% of female workers compared to 11% of all men workers (FOD Economie 2017a).

The gender pay gap in hourly wages of 8,5% is relatively low in European perspective. However, the gender pay gap rises considerably if the public sector is excluded: although it is narrowing in recent years, the pay gap in the private sector reaches to 22% for white collar workers and 19% for blue collar workers (IGVM 2017, p17). It has been showed that the gender pay gap increases with 4% when taking the gender gap in benefits into account (RGK MV 2011, p7).

The trend towards more female labour market participation and gender pay equality is however unequal among women indicating that the situation for some women is improving but not for all (IGVM 2016, p58). In relation to female labour market participation, the employment rate is lowest among low skilled and migrant women (29,9% and 27,8% for women with non-EU nationality, 2013). The lack of opportunities for well-paid work for some of these women and discrimination on the labour market are factors perpetuating the unequal labour participation of women and men (IGVM 2016, p25, p36, p44). The Gender Pay Gap Report of 2016 further notices a growing gap in the labour market between the group of well paid workers with benefits on one side and on the other side a growing group of low paid part-time workers, where women are overrepresented. In sum, over the last three decades, the situation for some women has improved considerably, as shown by the growing employment rate and a declining gender pay gap. But this improvement in some gender indicators obscures the rising inequality between high skilled and low skilled women. (IGVM 2016, p58)

Belgian industrial relations

The collective bargaining coverage rate of Belgium is 96%, only second to Austria (98%), where collective agreements are almost automatically extended (European Commission 2015, p29, Visser 2015). It covers the whole of the private sector.

Belgium is also among the European countries with a high degree of centralisation of collective bargaining. The Belgian collective bargaining system has a three-level structure (national, sectoral and company), with a strict hierarchy of agreements, where the lower level can only agree improvements on what has been negotiated at the level above (Fulton 2015). This is in contrast with the continuing and accelerating trend towards decentralisation observed in most European countries (EC 2015, p32, p36). The dominant level of collective wage bargaining in Belgium has become more central and highly coordinated, due to the role played by the government in wage negotiations in the aftermath of the economic crisis, setting ceilings for wage growth (the 1996 law on competitiveness, see further) and by imposing wage restraints in 2011 and 2013 (EC 2015, p31-32).

In relation to social partner organisations, both unions and employers' organizations are well organized at a national intersectoral level. 76% of employees work for an employer that is organised (EC 2011, p33) and union density in Belgium is relatively high and remained stable with over 50% of employees belonging to a union (50.4% in 2011, ICTWSS database of union membership see Visser 2015). Unionisation is higher among blue-collar workers than among white-collar workers (Van Gyes 2010). The proportion of women among union members is slightly lower than women's share of employees (48,5%). Women's proportion is highest in the Christian trade union CSC/ACV (46,7%), the Socialist union FGTV/ABVV and the smaller liberal union CGSLB/ACLVB count 44% female members (ETUC 2017, p13). The most recent ETUC Annual Gender Equality Survey reports the presence of women in leadership positions with CSC/ACV and CGSLB/ACLVB having parity (50%) in the leadership team, where the FGTV/ABVV counts 29% of women in the top of the confederation. These figures however do not include the sectoral trade union organisations, where the proportion of women among union leadership is much lower.

Government intervention in wage bargaining: the 1996 law on wage moderation

Government intervention in wage bargaining has increased considerably since the adoption of the Law of 26 July 1996 on the 'promotion of employment and preventative measures to safeguard competitiveness', which extended a previous law of 1989, setting ceilings for wage growth with the goal of enhancing the international competitiveness of the Belgian companies. According to the 1996 law, the wage standard is determined based on the assumed average wage increases in those countries which are Belgium's main trading partners, namely France, Germany and the Netherlands. The wage standard provides a framework for sectoral and enterprise collective bargaining and requires that trade unions

and employers' organisations limit their pay increases to the norm fixed biannually during the intersectoral negotiations. (Vervecken et al, 2008, Fulton 2015). Until the revision of the law in 2017, the wage norm was indicative but had nonetheless an important role. The law of 1996 foresees that in the case social partners do not agree on an indicative wage norm in their biannual intersectoral agreement, the government may react by imposing a legally binding norm (Vandekerckhove & Van Gyes 2012, p8). This was the case in 1997-1998 and for 2005-2006. For the years 2011-2012, in the aftermath of the economic crisis, the government imposed a maximum increase of 0.3%, and for the years 2013-2014-2015-2016, a freeze on all salaries.

Forecasting the national negotiations for an intersectoral agreement for the years 2017-2018, the government introduced several modifications to the 1996 law, reinforcing the compulsory nature of the wage norm and revising its calculation. In contrast with the previously indicative nature, from 2017 onwards, sectoral or company level agreements cannot exceed the maximum wage increase. Control of collective agreements and sanction mechanisms are amplified, with administrative fines ranging from 250 euros to 5.000 euros to be paid by employers (not sectors) exceeding the wage norm (the fine is to be multiplied by the number of workers concerned, up to a maximum of 100 workers). The automatic indexation of wages continues to be guaranteed, and is not included anymore in the percentage of the wage norm (ABVV 2017).

The Law of 22 April 2012 on the Gender Pay Gap introduces a gender equality provision in the Law of 1996, by stating that intersectoral negotiations over a wage norm should include measures to combat the gender pay gap, "with specific consideration for gender neutral function classifications". To guide these negotiations, a report on the gender pay gap will be included in the technical report produced by the CRB-CCE (see CRB 2017). In addition to these provisions directed at intersectoral social dialogue, the 2012 law introduces measures to tackle the gender pay gap at the sectoral and company level. A time schedule fixes an obligatory screening and if necessary, adaptation, of sectoral job classification systems on their gender neutrality by the Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue. At company level, the law (re)introduces some gender pay indicators in the social balance sheet and all enterprises with at least 50 employees must make up a biannual gender pay gap report (Demagos 2015, Borbély 2015).

National institutions of social dialogue

The current system of social dialogue was gradually institutionalised in the period after the Second World War, reflecting the consensus reached by social partners during German occupation (the 'draft agreement on Social Solidarity' of August 1944).

The Central Economic Council (CRB-CCE) was created in 1948 as a consultative body for the organisation of the economy and four years later, in 1952, the National Labour Council (NAR-CNT), was created as an advisory body for social issues. These two formal institutions are

complemented by a third *informal* bipartite space for intersectoral negotiations, the ‘Group of Ten’, which has concluded a first biannual intersectoral agreement in 1960. Alongside these bipartite institutions of social dialogue, social partners participate actively in the administration of social security institutions, where important discussions take place related to regulation over retirement, unemployment, sickness insurance, ... These structures of social concertation are not further discussed here.

The next sections will briefly present the NAR-CNT and CRB-CCE and describe how these formal institutions of social concertation work in close collaboration with the informal ‘Group of Ten’, with the goal of concluding and implementing the national intersectoral agreements. The focus is on the period since 1986.

Organisation of the social dialogue and social bargaining in Belgium (private sector)

Economic level	Stakeholders	Institutions, bodies	Results
The economy as a whole (synonyms: national or intersectoral or multi-industry)	Employer confederations (FEB, UCM, UNIZO, BF), trade union confederations (FGTB, CSC, CGSLB) and government	Group of ten	Multi-industry agreements (since 1961)
		National Labour Council	Collective labour agreements (since 1968)
		Central Economic Council	Opinions
Sector (synonyms: industry or industrial sector)	Groups of affiliated trade unions and employer organisations	Joint Committees	Sectoral collective labour agreements
		Special Consultative Committees	Opinions
Company	Trade union delegates and officials	Works Councils	Company level collective labour agreements
		Committees for Safety, Health and Well-Being in the Workplace	Opinions

Source: Cassiers & Denayer (2010)

National Labour Council

The bipartite National Labour Council (NAR-CNT) is the main intersectoral institution for social dialogue and has two main functions: the first is to advise a minister (the minister of employment and work or the minister of social policy) or the parliament on general social questions concerning employers and workers. Since 1952, the NAR-CNT has issued more than two thousand opinions. Second, since 1968, law mandates the NAR-CNT to agree autonomously on collective labour agreements covering the whole private sector, and thus for nearly 3 million workers (Ficher 2012, p80; Cox, Humblet & Rigaux 2011). 127 CLA’s have been concluded, some of them have been adapted at several occasions, for example CLA nr 21 and CLA nr 43 fixing the level of an intersectoral minimum wage, CLA nr 25 on equal pay for male and female workers and CLA nr 103 installing the time credit and career leave system (replacing CLA nr 77). Although the negotiations for biannual intersectoral agreements take place in the informal ‘Group of Ten’ (see below), the NAR-CNT plays a key role in the implementation and monitoring of the provisions mentioned in these ‘programming’ agreements. The NAR-CNT can also be involved in the preparation of

discussions for intersectoral ‘top level’ negotiations. For example since 2006, the budget allocation proposal for the welfare adjustment of social allowances is prepared in the NAR-CNT, as mandated by government. However, the proposal has often been included in negotiations inside the Group of Ten and the proposal attached to the biannual intersectoral agreement (Capron 2011).

Central Economic Council

The Central Economic Council (CRB - CCE) is composed of representatives of employers' associations and trade unions, plus six independent experts. Like the NAR-CNT, the CRB-CCE's first mission consists in advising the government on questions relating to the national economy (Blaise 2010). Since the adoption of the competitiveness laws of 1989 and 1996 the role of the CRB-CCE has been considerably enlarged. The law of 1996 gives the Economic Council the duty to produce a Technical report containing the ‘maximum available margin of growth in labour costs’ and a report on employment and wage cost changes. Subsequently, based on this technical report, intersectoral negotiations take place in the Group of Ten to agree on a national wage standard for the coming two years (see supra). Since 1998, when the calculation and methodology of the wage standard was accepted by both employers and trade unions, the CRB-CCE has become “a partner in a new social compromise” (Krzyszlo 1999, p46).

The Group of Ten

The ‘Group of Ten’ is an informal group composed of the top-level representatives of the national trade unions and employers’ organisations. The group is led by the chair of the VBO -FEB, the biggest employers’ federation, and meets in its headquarters. Every two years, this group negotiates with the goal of reaching a national intersectoral agreement that covers all workers in the private sector, called an ‘Interprofessioneel Akkoord’ or ‘Accord Interprofessionnel’ (IPA –AIP). The Group of Ten represents an informal and flexible organ (Ficher 2012, p80) for national level negotiations, and - as already explained above – the group works in close interaction with the NAR-CNT and CRB-CCE. The permanent interaction between formal and informal concertation constitutes certainly one of the particularities of the Belgian system of collective labour relations, which has permitted its functioning until today (Ficher 2012, p82; Devos, Mus & Humblet 2011). As Blaise (2010) remarks, the Group of Ten tends to have an increasingly stronger hold on the determination of the grand orientations of sectoral and company negotiations, through the intersectoral agreements (see further) or agreements on specific issues (Blaise 2010, p43).

As already noted above, since the 1996 law, these negotiations take place in the context of an official technical report produced by the CRB-CCE which sets out the forecast of the wage norm. The law of 1996 gives the government the power to intervene if the two sides cannot agree on a figure within this limit. The state thus potentially plays a major role in collective bargaining (Vervecken et al 2008, p83, Fulton 2015).

Gender composition of national institutions of social dialogue

Since 1986 until present, the number of women appointed by social partners in national level institutions for social dialogue has increased considerably. The NAR-CNT counts 27% women among its members in 2017, compared to 15% in 2002, 4% in 1990 and none in 1980. The representation of women among the social partner members in the CRB-CCE is slightly better: 33% women in 2017, compared to 20% in 2002 and 6% in 1991 (Ravesloot 2002, p254-257). The growing number of female negotiators in these structures reflects the feminisation of the staff of social partners. However, men often still occupy top-level positions.

In 1989, the ‘Group of Ten’ counted its first female member, Mia De Vits, who was also the first female president of a Belgian trade union (from 2002 to 2004), the socialist trade union FGVB-ABVV. She has been the only female member in the Group of Ten until 2004. During most recent negotiations, the group was composed of eight men and three women and was chaired by the first female president of the VBO-FEB, Michèle Sioen. Tables 1 and 2 show the gender composition of the main organs of collective bargaining in Belgium in 2002 and 2017 respectively, showing the increase over this 15-year period.

2002 social partners (employers/ trade unions)	Number of Male members	Number of Female members	Percentage female members
Group of Ten (1)	10 (5/4)	1 (0/1)	9%
NAR-CNT board (2)	22 (12/10)	4 (1/3)	15%
CRB-CCE (3)	35 (19/16)	9 (3/6)	20%
(1) chair included (2) members with voting right (3) full members, social partners only (without 3 independent experts) Source: intersectoral agreement 2003-2004, Ravesloot (2002), p253-258			

Table 2.1: Gender composition of the main organs of collective bargaining in Belgium in 2002

2017 social partners (employers/ trade unions)	Number of Male members	Number of Female members	Percentage female members
Group of Ten (1)	8 (4/4)	3 (2/1)	27%
NAR-CNT board (2)	19 (9/10)	7 (4/3)	27%
CRB-CCE (3)	32 (15/17)	16 (9/7)	33%
(1) chair included (2) members with voting right (3) full members, social partners only (without 6 independent experts) Source: intersectoral agreement 2017-2018, CRB-CCE, NAR-CNT (figures of 16/05/2017)			

Table 2.2: Gender composition of the main organs of collective bargaining in Belgium in 2017

The Commission for Women's Labour

Regarding the preparation for the International Women's Year of 1975, the Belgian Commission for Women's Labour was installed on 24 March of 1975 as an advisory body within the Ministry of Employment and Labour. The Council was created as a way to foster women's presence within decision-making structures as well as a tool for the government "to conduct a coherent policy regarding women's labour" (Jouan 2016, p14). It is mainly composed of representatives of the social partners, reflecting the Belgian tradition of social dialogue (Cockx 2009, p52-53). In the period between 1975-1992, the Commission has released 66 opinions on issues related to gender equality on the labour market, such as equal pay, occupational guidance, positive actions, part-time work, or protective measures. Since 1993, the Commission has been integrated in the larger Equal Opportunities Council for Men and Women, and has been renamed as the 'Permanent Labour Commission' (RGKMV 2016).

The advisory Commission has played an important role by organising seminars and awareness raising campaigns (RGKMV 2016, p5). It also provided a place where social partners had the opportunity to understand each other's views, even when no consensus was reached on all topics (Cockx 2009, p53). However, in contrast with the initial period of the Commission, where the main employers' federation VBO-FEB contributed actively to the preparation of opinions, since the merger in the larger Equal Opportunities Council, the presence of employers' organisations has become less regular (interview with president of Commission for Women's Labour).

Characteristics of intersectoral agreements

In this section, the main characteristics of intersectoral agreements (IPA-AIP) are briefly presented. Before turning to the set up and outcomes of this research, it is important to depict the socio-political relevance and particular status of these 'gentlemen's' agreements, their original and transforming functions and goals, and the flexibility and large scope in their content.

Relevance and status

A first important characteristic is that the biennial intersectoral agreements concluded in the Group of Ten must be distinguished from the collective labour agreements (CLA) concluded in the NAR-CNT. Intersectoral agreements constitute a sort of 'gentlemen's agreement' containing a range of political and moral commitments, but these are not formal collective agreements. They are not legally binding and thus have either to be enforced in law by the government, or translated in national collective labour agreements (CLA) settled in the NAR-CNT, for the non-wage elements (Ficher 2012, p95). Rather in contradiction with the fact that nor the Group of Ten nor the IPA-agreements have a formal legal status, two federal laws are legally delegating the intersectoral negotiations and thus the IPA-agreements: the already presented 1996 Law on the Wage standard and the 2012 Law on the Gender pay

gap. These laws underscore the political importance of the intersectoral agreements without however giving them a legal status (Cox 2013, p29). While these agreements are negotiated autonomously by the social partners, and often contribute to the setting of social policy orientations, they are reached in close interaction with government, giving them a kind of 'semi-social pact' statute. Moreover, since the law of 1996, the government has the legal right to intervene in negotiations (Vandekerckhove & Van Gyes 2012, p5, Cox et al 2011, p27).

Transforming goals

Historically, in the post war context of economic growth and full employment, the aim of negotiations between social partners over an intersectoral agreement was to reach a framework agreement that had to be executed in the sectors and companies to permit the realisation of "an equitable sharing of the gains of productivity and the fruits of economic growth" (Capron 2010, p228). This big compromise between capital and labour dependent on continuing productivity increases and economic growth, ceased to exist from 1975 onwards (Cox 2013, p38; Cassiers & Denayer 2010, p12). Sectoral negotiations within the joint committees continued but the intersectoral dynamic failed to reach new cross-sectoral solidarity agreements, except for the short-lived 1981 agreement concluded under pressure of the new centre-right government (Cassiers & Denayer 2010, p17). From 1986, intersectoral negotiations resumed arduously in a context of crisis and in an increasingly globalized economic market, however the logic of intersectoral agreements was completely reversed. Wage moderation and the creation of employment become the main aim of discussions, and this is accompanied by an offensive strategy by the employers when they as well, present a list of claims to be discussed during negotiations. The central agreement since then fixes a framework of recommendations, including on wage moderation, to negotiate thereafter in sectors and companies (Ficher 2012, p81).

Functions

The functions of intersectoral agreements respond to the different expectations of the representatives of workers on the one hand, and of the employers on the other hand (Blaise 1989, p45). Trade unions, concerned with solidarity, want to prevent too large distortions between rich and/or high unionised sectors and the others. They want to obtain new advantages for all workers of the private sector or extend advantages obtained in strong sectors to the benefit of weaker sectors. This is the social programming function. The solidarity function has been extended since 1986, when social partners agreed to dedicate a part of the wage mass to vocational training and employment of the most vulnerable (Blaise 1993, p33, p45).

Employers' organisations accept to make concessions in exchange of a guarantee that there will be no conflict at the national and intersectoral level during the period covered by the agreement. By concluding an intersectoral agreement, employers and trade unions consider that they have arranged all pending national problems, the first engaging to execute the

decisions and the latter that they will not claim more, nor start a strike at the intersectoral level. This is the 'social peace' clause that is adopted, despite that the agreements are not legally binding, thus depending on the capacity of unions to impose discipline among their rank and file (Blaise 1989, p33, p45, Ficher 2012, p80).

A last important function is that of legitimacy. An agreement constitutes one of the main functions of the national intersectoral organisations and has a big symbolic meaning for the system of peak collective labour relations (Blaise 1993, p33).

Content and characteristics of provisions

Intersectoral agreements cover a much wider range of topics than normal pay and working conditions issues. Since 1986 agreements include a wide range of provisions such as job creation measures, vocational and continuing training, a childcare fund, and more recently parental and career leave, working time reduction, incentives for innovation and research, conditions for the reduction of employers' contributions, etc. (Cox 2013, p39). Pay bargaining is traditionally dealt with at industry and company level (Fulton 2015). However, since the 1996 law on the wage standard, the framework for pay increases is set at the national level and has become increasingly regulated and stringent in recent years.

The nature of these provisions is varying and relates to the recipient: on the one hand, social partners address a range of injunctions, propositions or recommendations to a third party, the government or the social partners at sectoral or company level. The framework provisions for collective negotiations on sectoral and company level are very influential however the normative scope and thus the success of implementation is difficult to measure and depends on the power balance between sectoral social partners and the available margin of negotiation in function of the economic health of the sector and its exposure to international competition (Ficher 2012, p99-100). On the other hand, the intersectoral social partners take mutual engagements regarding a certain number of questions with variable normative intensity: this can consist in an engagement to discuss, or the provision can be very precise or, the opposite, the formulation is sometimes very shy and prudent. This variation in intensity means that it is easier to come to an agreement that satisfies every party, and ultimately the negotiation autonomy towards the government can be preserved (Ficher 2012, p95, p97).

3. Research questions

The European and Belgian political and socio-economic context has changed profoundly during the last three decades covered by this research. The broad aim of this study is to investigate how the increasing labour participation of women is reflected in the intersectoral agreements and thus in the priorities and strategy of social partners towards the inclusion of new groups and their positioning in the transforming labour market.

The Belgian intersectoral agreements have an explicit solidarity objective: first, to share the fruits of economic growth equally among capital and labour, and second, to extend provisions from strong to weaker sectors, and more recently, since the growth of unemployment, solidarity between workers and the unemployed or inactive population. To what extent are these broad equality objectives translated into concrete measures adopted in agreements and how do they particularly contribute to more gender equality? In other words, how is the goal of gender equality integrated in these broad, class-based solidarity objectives? Which changing external (economic and political) and internal (process and actor based) factors have played a role in the adoption of new provisions and which of these factors impede progress? How are specific gendered issues such as the work-family nexus addressed? What are the longitudinal trends in equality objectives promoted by social partners through the intersectoral agreements, is there a progress towards substantial equality? These are relatively broad theoretical questions addressed in the field of equality bargaining and gendered industrial relations. This research wants to contribute to these theoretical debates by examining the case of a highly centralized and coordinated system of collective bargaining, where the institution of intersectoral negotiations explicitly represents this equality goal.

The analytical scope of this research will be on the 'institution' of (intersectoral) collective bargaining, which constitutes a key strategy of trade unions in their collective defence of workers. The focus will thus be on the dynamics *between* social 'partners', more than the dynamics inside trade unions.

The first research question assesses how gender equality is operationalized in the agreements between 1987 and 2017 through analysing the outcomes of the agreements and comparing the outcomes in different time lapses within a changing economic, political, (and ideological) landscape. To which extent are the demands of women workers reflected in the collective agreements, and consequently implemented? Do the outcomes of the agreements contribute to the goal of substantive gender equality? What are the limitations of national social dialogue in reaching gender equality?

A second research question examines the external and internal factors influencing the negotiation process and potential outcomes of national level equality bargaining in a coordinated system of industrial relations. Which specific characteristics of Belgian national level social dialogue influence the gender equality agenda?

This study concludes by raising some future challenges for equality bargaining in Belgian social dialogue.

4. Methodology

The study consists in a gender analysis of the Belgian national intersectoral agreements concluded from the mid-1980s until present based on a content analysis of the agreements, a qualitative study of the bargaining process and outcomes through semi-structured interviews, and lastly it relies on a wide range of other written sources to help interpreting the bargaining process but also the evolving political and socioeconomic context impacting on the negotiations. An important difference with the sectoral and company-level collective bargaining process is that national level bargaining happens in close interaction with the national political arena and is increasingly influenced by the European economic and social agenda.

The research focuses on provisions related to gender equality, although the agreements often contain provisions towards other 'vulnerable' groups, such as the unemployed, the youth and the elder workers, migrants or workers with a disability. This reduced scope is partly a methodological and practical choice. Future research could be developed to examine some of these 'gender neutral' equality provisions, or provisions specifically focused towards a particular group.

The research is based on a triangulation of methods of data-collection and analysis, with the goal of creating a "fuller picture of the research phenomena as well as to verify and validate the consistency and integrity of research findings" (Rothbauer 2008, p894). The research thus combines a wide range of written and qualitative sources. The written sources are firstly, the original texts of the intersectoral agreements concluded between 1986 and 2017. Each text was analysed in detail to identify the measures in favour of (gender) equality. These findings were gathered in a master table that was gradually simplified towards some key recurring gender equality topics. This content analysis was used to prepare (part of) the topic list for the interviews, or to prepare specific questions to a certain expert-respondent. These overview tables were also used as a supportive document during the interviews.

Second, a wide range of other publicly available written documents were used for a better understanding of the process, content and implementation of these agreements. Most important are the detailed analyses of the intersectoral agreements produced by the French speaking Socio-political Research and Information Center 'CRISP' (Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politiques) (see Blaise 1986, 1988, 1990, 1993; Blaise & Beaupain 1995; Arcq 2001, 2005; Capron 2009, 2010, 2011). For the agreements where no CRISP dossier exists, articles of the annual publication 'Année Sociale'⁵ were used (see Krzeslo & Martinez 1997; Krzeslo 1999, 2007). In addition to these, articles or reports of social partners, public institutions for social dialogue and gender equality, the Eurofound website,... were consulted. As background information, I had access to internal union notes, and the four-

⁵ Année Sociale is a publication of the French speaking Sociology Institute of the Free University of Brussels with a broad scope ranging from industrial relations, labour policy, migration and equality policy, etc... It was published until 2007.

yearly statutory reports published by the Socialist trade union ABVV-FGTB. A limitation here is that the two other Belgian trade unions largely remained out of scope, except for publicly available information on their websites.

In addition to these written sources, seventeen semi-structured interviews were conducted that each lasted between 1 and 3 hours, and took place a few months after the signature of a new national intersectoral agreement for 2017-2018. Due to this particular context, the interviews put greater emphasis on the most recent period of collective bargaining although recent developments are set against the background of longer term developments of the Belgian collective bargaining system, however this depended heavily on the length of service of respondents in their function.

These 'expert' interviews helped to understand the negotiation process and context and to understand actors' motivations behind the different measures.

The questions in the semi structured interviews were related to the bargaining context (political, economic,...), bargaining process and finally the issues discussed during negotiations, such as wages (equal pay, minimum wage), positive actions, measures aiming reconciliation of work and private life,... The questions were based on the analysis of the content of the agreements and for the questions related to the negotiation process, on a literature review on equality bargaining (for example Williamson (2010) contains an elaborated list of questions related to the equality bargaining process).

The interviewees were selected based on their positioning in the intersectoral organisations and /or their involvement in the negotiation process of national social dialogue or their expertise on gender equality in social dialogue.

These persons were gender experts operating inside trade unions (4), union negotiators (5) or union officers (4) and three representatives of employer organizations. To complement the views of social partners, interviews were held with 4 public service officers concerned with social dialogue (2) and gender equality (2).

The interview technique of the semi-structured interviews gradually evolved towards the methodology of 'expert interviewing' (Van Audenhove 2007, Littig 2013; Bogner, Littig & Menz 2009). Expert-interviews are interested in the expert as a representative of an organisation or institution and his/her special knowledge and experiences resulting from this specific functional status within the organisation or institution (Littig 2013, p13). Littig argues that expert interviewing is a special method because of methodological considerations (the definition of experts and expert knowledge) and practical issues due to the interaction during interviews (p3). The interaction between the interviewer and expert can have multiple forms. I recognized my role as a researcher in three types according to Littig's typology: interviewer as lay person, as confederate and as possible critic (and maybe also as a co-expert towards the end of the data-collection period) (Littig 2013, p21; Van Audenhove 2007, p10). The data-analysis of the interviews was organised as follows: the interviews

were transcribed, each relevant paragraph was labelled with multiple labels and ordered according to themes (and actors), and themes were clustered if necessary. A table of content was gradually constructed, the themes within the scope of this research were analysed through looking for communalities, divergences and conflicting opinions, and by identifying relations between the themes. Finally, these insights and data were related to the literature and the theoretical framework (Van Audenhove 2007, p32-33).

Lastly, my own positioning in the field of social dialogue was very useful. My work for a regional intersectoral trade union was helpful, although I experienced that the regional context and content of my work differs considerably from the national level and top-level negotiations for an intersectoral agreement. I could follow the negotiations over the last intersectoral agreement for 2017-18 through different union meetings including meetings of various women constituencies in the socialist trade union.

Assessing the scope and limitations of study

1. Methodological scope: intersectoral and national level of analysis

A limitation in the methodology is that the interviews were only conducted with persons involved in intersectoral social dialogue. Since many items in intersectoral agreements are recommendations to other levels of social dialogue (sectoral and company level), it would be interesting to assess the implication and the implementation in practice of these recommendations, through interviews or a survey. In the context of this study it was not possible to do this.

2. Scope of collective bargaining: intersectoral agreements

This study methodologically focuses on the intersectoral agreements, however social dialogue extends beyond these biannual agreements. Insofar that there is a link with a provision mentioned in the intersectoral agreements, these concertation processes are also considered, however, it is beyond the scope of this study to assess all action of social partners, such as the discussions over social security rights, or to assess political lobbying of social partners to unilateral government actions. This study thus necessarily highlights just one part of the bigger action of social partners in relation to gender equality: on the one hand, social concertation in a very broad meaning, and on the other hand political action and lobbying to influence government measures, and thus bypassing the consensus/compromise dependent method of social concertation.

3. Scope of equality: gender equality

Another limitation is that this study focuses on the items directly related to gender equality. In fact, all items included in the agreements have a potentially different impact on women and men workers. In the framework of this research that aims to highlight broad tendencies over three decades, it is not possible to assess all topics treated in the agreement; such a 'gender mainstreaming' analysis would also need a more quantitative methodology.

The choice of topics is those that are recognised as such explicitly or implicit by (one of) the social partners as impacting gender equality or favouring the position of women on the labour market. These issues are: positive actions, women employment and child care infrastructure, equal pay and function classification, career leave and working time, the minimum wage, part-time work and flexibility measures. On the issue of part-time work and flexibility, although some data were gathered, it will not be treated extensively, because the question needs an in depth research on its own and it was not a key recurring provision in the intersectoral agreements.

5. Gender equality outcomes of intersectoral agreements 1987-2017

This chapter examines how gender equality has been operationalized in the intersectoral agreements between 1987 and 2017. We present the outcomes of negotiations in relation to gender equality and union claims in general, and discuss the main factors influencing negotiations and the extent to which the provisions have been implemented and maintained. The goal is to assess the equality potential of national intersectoral bargaining.

The following narrative is a gendered historical reconstruction of Belgian industrial relations and gender equality over the last three decades, with a focus on the negotiation process of intersectoral negotiations, in relation to the transforming political, economic (and ideological) context.

Since 1986, social partners concluded ten intersectoral agreements; three draft agreements were rejected by one or two trade unions (in 2005-06, 2011-12 and 2015-16). In 1997-98 and 2013-14, no intersectoral agreement was reached. The last agreement was settled recently for the period of 2017-2018 (see table A.1 in attachment for an overview).

In the time of study, two turning points – 1996 and 2008 – signified the start of a new era in national social dialogue. Each period has some common topics in relation to core bargaining issues but also stands for a particular gender equality approach. The next chapters will introduce the general context of each period, the negotiation process and main outcomes followed by a presentation of the gender equality provisions of the agreements and an assessment of their implementation.

Period	Number of intersectoral agreements	Core bargaining topics	Main gender equality items	Main gender strategy
1987-1996	5	Employment measures Risk groups Minimum wage increase	Positive action plans Child care fund	'Special' measures
1999-2008	4 + 1 draft	Wage standard, Training & Employment Net increase low wages Extension of risk groups Innovation	Equal pay – function classification Continuing training - women Career leave system	Addressing (gender) disadvantage
2009-2017	2 + 2 draft	Wage standard/ wage freeze Welfare adjustment budget End of career Blue & White collar	Adaptation of career leave	

Table 5.1: Overview of periods of study, core bargaining topics and main gender equality provisions

5.1. Introduction: Socio-economic transformation and gender equality before 1986

The tradition of national intersectoral agreements started in 1960. Between 1960 and 1975, seven agreements were concluded with the goal of sharing the fruits of economic growth among all, in exchange of social peace. In a Fordist logic, productivity growth was shared between capital and labour to increase the purchasing power of workers. A second goal of the national intersectoral agreements was to extend improvements in wages and working time obtained in stronger economic sectors to less favoured ones (Blaise 1988, p47, Capron 2010, p225). Except for the atypical agreement signed between social partners in 1981, no national intersectoral agreements were concluded between 1976 and 1985.

Since the economic crisis of the mid-1970's, the dynamic of bilateral social programming sputtered as a result of altering social relations and the restructuring of the economy. Women were strongly affected by the breakdown of traditionally female sectors such as confection, textile and services, and by the introduction of new technologies. The technological evolution resulted in a demand for higher skilled (technical) workers and women were particularly touched by unemployment, because of a mismatch of their education and vocational training with the labour market (Cockx 2009, p72-73).

The reduction of working time has been a key claim of trade unions, for example the demand for the eight hours working day. It has come on the foreground since the 1970s as a solution to unemployment by redistributing the available work among workers and the unemployed. Apart from some government led initiatives (pilot projects) to promote collective work redistribution schemes, the employers have generally blocked this claim at the intersectoral level⁶. Since the 1980s, employers have generally argued for more flexibility in working hours as a solution for unemployment and to enhance the competitiveness of the national economy.

From the beginning of the 1980s, the Belgian government responded to the economic downturn by limiting wage increases and promoting part-time work among women to 'share available jobs' and to respond to employers' demand for more flexibility. At the end of the 1980s, 23% of women were working part-time compared to only 2% of men, and unemployment among women was still double of men's unemployment (Blaise 1990, p37).

Policy initiatives were implemented by the State secretary for Social Emancipation Miet Smet to counter stereotyped choices of girls in education (Cockx 2009, p73), as part of the broader European equal opportunities policy which aimed the diversification of professional choices (Cockx 2009, p74). She also introduced the notion of positive actions as a policy tool for equal opportunities and a Royal Decree (RD of 14 July 1987) promoted positive action

⁶ At sectoral and company level initiatives have been taken to reduce working time. This was promoted by the then government with tax reduction systems.

plans on a voluntary basis in sectors and companies of the private sector (Wuiame 1996, p14, Cockx 2009).

5.2. Intersectoral social dialogue and equality from 1986 to 1996

In 1986, the tradition of national intersectoral dialogue resumed hesitantly. Nevertheless, government influence in negotiations continued indirectly through imposing wage moderation, and more directly by proposing measures or by mediating negotiations when these were obstructed due to divergent positions between employers and trade unions.

The agreements signed in the period from 1986 until 1995 have some characteristics in common. A novelty is the growing notion of competitiveness that was introduced in the 1980s. Sectoral wage negotiations remain free but the intersectoral agreement urges negotiators to take competitiveness into account. As Blaise observes, where the agreements in the period 1960-1975 proposed recommendations to *extend* improvements in working conditions and salary, the agreements signed hereafter have a very different logic: they contain recommendations, in particular concerning wages, to *moderate* and take competitiveness and the specific characteristics of the sector or company into account (Blaise 1988, p47). In 1989, the federal government intervenes more directly by adopting a law on wage moderation that imposes an obligation of result (Capron 2010, p233). In the beginning of 1993, “the ink has hardly dried”⁷ of the new intersectoral agreement for 1993-1994, when the law is applied for the first time. After the failure of tripartite discussions, the government imposes a wage freeze and adapts the indexation mechanism through the ‘Global Plan’. The Global Plan also contains flexibility measures and the promotion of part-time work, that “in principle should be beneficial to employment” (Blaise 1995, p31). These measures are part of Belgian economic and social reforms in order to fulfil the Maastricht treaty of the European Union. The Global Plan triggers a general strike and heavy protests by trade unions. Despite an imposed wage freeze for the period 1995-1996, social partners reach an exceptional agreement at the end of 1994, which is more an act to preserve the system of national intersectoral collective bargaining (Blaise & Beaupain 1995). This period takes an end in 1996, when social partners decide that no consensus can be reached in the context of the new ‘wage standard’ law imposed by the federal government after the failure of several tripartite meetings (on the law of 1996: see the introductory chapter on Belgian social dialogue).

Outcomes of intersectoral negotiations

The agreements in this period reflect a general concern for solidarity with the unemployed and inactive persons. Despite the wavering recovery of the economy, unemployment levels remain high. Starting in 1989, national social partners agree to devote a percentage of aggregate remunerations to the training and employment of unprivileged groups (called

⁷ The statutory report of the socialist trade union notes in 1997: “De inkt van deze conventie was nog niet droog toen de wet op het concurrentievermogen roet in het eten kwam gooien.”(ABVV 1997, p20)

'groups at risk') (Blaise 1993, p33). The percentage that employers must spend or invest in the Employment Fund⁸ ranges from 0,18% in 1989, 0,25% in 1991 and is fixed at 0,10% from 1999 until now (the engagement must be renewed within each intersectoral agreement)⁹.

The intersectoral minimum wage¹⁰

The gradual increase of the minimum wage¹¹, symbolized the solidarity objective of intersectoral agreements regarding the low wage earners. In this period, the minimum wage also sets a kind of standard or guideline for wage increases in sectoral negotiations (Blaise & Verly 1990, p27).

However, the union claims to increase the minimum wage particularly affects SME-employers, as did two other union claims: the generalisation of the 38 hours week and trade union representation in SME enterprises. Confronted with these three union claims it is the minimum wage increase that encountered least resistance from the SME employers. Blaise (1993) traces the negotiation process of 1992, and notes that the SME employers initially blocked these three union claims, however: *"face à la détermination des syndicats qui exigeaient de traiter d'au moins un de ces points, les organisations de classes moyennes ont accepté un relève du salaire minimum"* (Blaise 1993b, p69, see also Blaise 1993a, p19).

Gender equality outcomes

The focus on employment and the unemployed is also reflected in the provisions favourable to gender equality with a key role given to positive actions for women and the financing of child care infrastructure. The agreement of 1987-88 recognizes the specific need for training for young women given their high proportion of unemployment. The next three agreements develop the tool of positive actions for women. In 1991-1992 the need for more childcare facilities for working parents is recognized, which leads in 1993 to an employer's contribution to the childcare fund. Both provisions are discussed in more detail below.

Other provisions in the agreements are the extension of maternal and paternal leave and the issue of night work for women¹². Part-time work¹³ (and flexibility) have a marginal place in

⁸ Companies can also contribute to a sectoral fund or prove that they did the investment themselves.

⁹ The engagement of 0,10% must be transferred to an Employment Fund or can be spent on individual or collective basis.

¹⁰ Table A.2 in attachment presents the increases of the minimum wages from 1987 until 2017.

¹¹ A guaranteed average monthly minimum wage (GAMMW) was introduced by the national intersectoral agreement of 1975 and translated in a national CLA 43 concluded in the NAR-CNT. The GAMMW is the minimum wage that private sector employers must guarantee to a full-time worker for an average month. The worker's average monthly wage (AMW) is calculated by adding up the different wage elements for a calendar year to obtain the annual wage. Based on the number of months worked, a monthly average is then calculated. If there is a difference to the GAMMW, the employer has to make it up (Vandekerckhove & Van Gyes 2012, p5-6).

¹² Although the issue of night work for women was an important discussion item in social dialogue during the 1980's and 1990's, and reflects very well European policy towards gender equality, I will not discuss it here. On the issue, see for example Wuïame (1996) and Humblet (2011).

the agreements and are not explicitly recognized as gendered issues in the agreement texts. Table 5.2 gives an overview of the gender equality provisions taken in the period between 1987 and 1998, together with some political and economic indicators. (The original texts of the recurring gender equality provisions included in the agreements are copied in the tables in attachment.)

IPA Signature date	%GDP growth*	%Unemployment	Federal government coalition**	Wage standard/index	Gender equality provisions and references
1987-1988 7/11/1986		9,8 /8,8	Christian-liberal	Wage ^a moderation	Promotion of employment including female
1989-1990 18/11/1988		7,4 /6,6	Christian-socialist-flemish	Wage ^a moderation	Positive action Minimum wage increase
1991-1992 27/11/1990		6,4 /7,1	Christian-socialist		Positive action, child care fund Minimum wage increase Maternity leave, paternity leave
1993-1994 09/12/1992		8,6 /9,8	Christian-socialist		Positive action, child care fund Minimum wage increase
1995-1996 07/12/1994	0 / 1,6	9,7/ 9,5	Christian-socialist	Index: 1,55/1,66	child care fund Work redistribution primes
1997-1998 No agreem	3,7/ 2	9,2 /9,3	Christian-socialist	6.1% Index 1,32/ 1,28	No agreement Government extends child care fund and

Source: Vandekerckhove & Van Gyes 2012, NBB, IPA agreements
* First year of agreement/ second year of agreement
**At moment of negotiations and/or signature
^aIndexation and wage increase possible for low wages (<35.000 BEF)

Table 5.2: Intersectoral agreements (1987-1998), economic and political context, wage norm and gender equality provisions.

Positive action plans

Three national agreements include a provision to develop positive action plans in sectoral or company negotiations. In the private sector, these plans are voluntary and without obligatory quota (RD of 14 July 1987). In the 1988-89 negotiation process, social partners agree rapidly and apparently without great discussion on promoting equality plans for women and men in the private sector (Blaise 1988, p25). Social partners propose the Minister to install a Positive Actions cell within the Ministry of Labour to support sectoral social partners in setting up positive action plans and to reorient unemployed women. This proposal is confirmed by a recommendation of the Commission for Women's Labour (recommendation 51 of 5 December 1988) that recalls the need to encourage positive actions for women and make them ordinary instruments of industrial relations. The cell is installed in May 1989 and was composed of four persons (Blaise & Verly 1990, p21).

The agreement of 1991-92 introduces the possibility of positive actions being funded by the national employment fund or by sectoral funds (Wuiame 1996, p14). The agreement of 1993-94 is the last one to tackle the issue of positive actions for women. Social partners ask

¹³ See table A.3 in attachment for an overview of all references related to part-time work in the intersectoral agreements.

for a continuation and reinforcement of positive actions, and in the annexed protocol, they demand the government to oblige companies undergoing restructuring to have a positive action plan for women.

Despite these recommendations to develop positive action plans in the private sector, they have never produced any spectacular effects (Jacqmain 2005, p12). The actions that have been undertaken were “a few declarations of intent concerning positive actions in about 20 sectors and, at best, a few studies on the situation of women in a given sector” (Wuiame 1996, p.14). Some achievements have been made in the private sector regarding vocational training “in traditionally ‘male’ trades for small groups of unemployed women, co-candidates for higher positions, women-friendly wording in job advertisements, the gender desegregation of selection boards, etc.” (Jacqmain 2012, p46). The existence of an equal opportunities plan is still a requirement for enterprises in restructuring that apply for the Enterprise Closure Fund¹⁴ (Jacqmain 2005, p11), and a staff member of the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men is still available to help enterprises with this plan (interview with Gender Equality Officer of the Institute), although the requirement is not more than a formality and is not discussed by social partners sitting in the Enterprise Closure Fund (interview with trade union officer). The motivation behind this union claim is that union officers noticed that in companies in restructuring “it were mainly the short-skilled, in majority women, that had to leave. The idea was to reskill women so they could enter in another job” (interview with former Gender Equality Officer).

Child care fund

Probably the most remarkable achievement of this period is the employers’ contribution of 0,05 % of total salary mass to finance specific childcare initiatives for working parents. A childcare fund (FCUD-FESC) is created in 1974 in response to the massive influx of women on the labour market. In 1990, the Federal Government decides to promote out-of-school childcare structures. In 1992, social partners mark their appreciation for this initiative, without actually involving themselves in funding such measures (Wuiame 1996, p27). The claim for the funding of specific work-related childcare by social partners initiatives originates in the service union. Here, many employees worked in flexible hours that are incompatible with school hours and holidays. Several public campaigns and actions are organised by the intersectoral women constituencies of unions. During the negotiations, the proposal receives support from the negotiator of the SME employers’ organisation UCM (interview with former trade union official), and in 1993, the National Labour Council formulates an unanimous opinion on child care (ETUC, CEEP, UNICE, UEAPME 2005, p39). The intersectoral agreement of 1994-95 confirms the engagement of social partners by introducing a social contribution of 0,05% of the salary mass to be paid by every employer of the private sector to the child care fund.

¹⁴ R.D. of 27 August 1993 which inserts R.D. of 29 August 1985, Art. 1bis (Jacqmain 2005, p11)

The newly created budget financed specific child care projects mainly to respond to the needs of working parents with flexible working hours, and for sick or emergency care and out-of-school-time care for children (ETUC et al 2005, p39). The initiative is very successful to that extent that the fund's budget reserves were exhausted in 1997. In subsequent negotiations, unions tried to raise the employers' contribution, but this was not successful (interview with former Gender Equality Officer). In 1997, the Federal Government decided to stop the (ad hoc) federal contribution to the general missions of the Fund, in the light of the devolution of child care to the federated entities of the Belgian federal state. The specific funding of the social partners continues to finance flexible child care initiatives until 2015. This remnant of the federal FCUD-FESC fund is then transferred to the Flemish and French Community as part of the sixth Belgian state reform, despite trade unions' opposition to the transfer of 'their' budget. Nevertheless, the budget continues to fund childcare initiatives in accordance to its initial objectives and social partners are involved in its administration¹⁵.

Conclusion

The instrument of positive actions was initially a proposal of the State secretary of Social emancipation, but it was also a key demand of the women's movement at that time. However, the implementation of positive action plans for women in the private sector has not been very successful. In the intersectoral agreement of 2007-08, the engagement of social partners to develop positive actions in the private sector is renewed but now in the policy framework of non-discrimination and diversity.

The second major initiative of the 1990s was the intersectoral child care fund, its importance being that it signified intersectoral solidarity between male and female sectors and between big and small employers, since the contribution had to be paid by all employers. Male sectors thus contributed to the inclusion of women on the labour market by removing an employment trap that affected mostly young women. The question of child care was (and still is) not a conflicting issue between social partners, however, there is more discussion on the role social partners should play in the organisation (and financing) of child care or whether it is solely the responsibility of public authorities. Unions argue that work related child care is *also* a responsibility of social partners, and certainly when it is related to work flexibility. Eventually, the intersectoral child care fund of the social partners has disappeared from the federal level, and the same counts for other competences such as continuing training (paid education leave). The devolution of competences to lower political levels challenges future intersectoral claims in areas such as child care, becoming an issue for the regional structures of social partners.

Both positive actions and child care initiatives could be qualified as 'special measures'. The aim of these measures was to combat the higher unemployment levels of (young) women,

¹⁵ Child care initiatives are administrated by Kind & Gezin for the Flemish Community and by ONE for the Wallonia & Brussels Federation (Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance).

to facilitate their inclusion or promotion in organisations, their reskilling in case of restructuring.

However, as the then Minister of Work and Equal Opportunities later testified, the increase of the number of women on the labour market did not lead to the qualitative amelioration of their position (Smet in Cockx 2009, p. 72).

The economic and political context were relatively prosperous for gender equality, with the Beijing conference organised in 1995, important also was that the Minister of Labour was committed to gender equality and to social dialogue. She also introduced a Royal Decree (12 august 1993), that stipulated that companies have to present an annual report on equal chances for men and women, but the result of this measure was limited and disappointing (Cockx 2009, p76).

Since the change of the millennium and the increased training and employment rate of women, attention has drifted away from women as a 'risk group' (Van Haegendoren 2000). Under influence of the new strategy of gender mainstreaming, policy recognizes the importance of equal opportunities for both women and men, and the issue of reconciliation of work and family life or care work becomes a central focus of government and social partners. The policy instrument of positive actions has been transformed and focusses now on a wider range of 'diversity' groups such as migrants, lower skilled, youth and older workers, where actions related to gender equality or work life balance are one of a series. In the intersectoral agreement of 2007-08, social partners renewed their support for positive actions and diversity plans which includes equal opportunities for both women and men.

These items all become central in the equality provisions in the next period of study, which starts at the end of 1998, when negotiations for a new intersectoral agreement resumed.

5.3. Social dialogue and gender equality at the start of a new millennium

In 1998, the Belgian government searched for the approval by the social partners of the National Employment Action Plan (NAP) that was submitted to the European institutions. The conclusion of a new intersectoral agreement – the last one was the minimal agreement of 1994 - would symbolize social partners' acceptance of its employment policy¹⁶, after two failed government initiatives to conclude a tripartite social pact (in 1993 and 1996). The federal government had put a reduction of social contributions on the table to facilitate negotiations. But also, the national social partners, after the breakdown of previous negotiations and confronted with various centrifugal tendencies, sought to reinstall their legitimacy, which is bound to the success of national level negotiations (Krzyszlo 1999, p39-40).

At the change of the new millennium, economic conjuncture became more favourable (with a temporary downturn in 2003). The national political context changed considerably with the installation of a progressive 'rainbow' coalition government that introduced the notion of the 'active welfare state'. The quality of life and reconciliation of work and family life became central issues in political debates. The system of legislated candidate quotas introduced in 1994 also led to a steady increase of the number of women members in the Federal Parliament, their participation increasing from 10% in 1991 to 38% in 2007 (cited in De Bethune & Van Hoof 2013). This period is also characterized by increased attention for other 'diversity' groups such as workers with a foreign origin, or with a disability.

Intersectoral negotiations and the wage standard

As a consequence of the law of 1996, introducing a technical procedure to determine a wage standard, the debate of national intersectoral negotiations has increasingly narrowed around the issue of wages and the 'wage standard'. The negotiations of the 1999-2000 agreement started with the question how the wage standard should be calculated (what counts as 'labour costs'¹⁷) and whether it is a fixed (binding) or a flexible (indicative) wage standard (Krzyszlo 1999, p42). At the demand of trade unions, the wage standard would be considered as a reference and not as an authorised maximum. While the 2001-02 agreement confirmed the indicative nature of the standard, it opened possibilities to go beyond the

¹⁶ The government succeeded in its objective: the preamble of the intersectoral agreement for 1999-2000 states that: "The social partners wish to participate in the realisation of the Belgian NAP for employment of April 1998, and in particular in the programme set for the reduction of labour costs and training with a view to improving the employability of the working-age population." After two unsuccessful attempts to reach a tripartite social pact on employment, this agreement thus signifies the acceptance of the EU Employment Guidelines by the social partners and in particular, the trade unions.

¹⁷ "The main problem centres on defining the term 'labour costs': working time, employers' contributions, in-service training, supplementary pensions, forms of financial participation and job evaluation have all proved controversial - should they be included or not?". "This question is certainly crucial for the success of the negotiations on a wage standard. The more that is left out of the calculation, the more readily the social partners on the workers' side will reach agreement - but the more labour costs rise, the less happy the employers are likely to be" (Bruyninckx 1998).

agreed 6,1%. Growth sectors may negotiate an extra non-recurring 0,4% benefit and the cost of the solidarity measures, calculated at an average of 0,2%, will not be counted in the indicative wage norm¹⁸ (IPA 2001-2002, p3, ABVV 2000, p5).

In subsequent negotiations trade unions largely succeed in maintaining the indicative nature of the wage standard. However, since the negotiations for the 2005-06 draft agreement, employers contend that 'wage drift' has worsened the international position of Belgian economy. So the 'wage handicap' between Belgian wages and the wages of the three neighbouring countries must be taken into account in the calculation of the wage standard in order to caught up this 'wage handicap' (sometimes also called confusingly, the 'wage gap'). The result is that wage negotiations become more and more technocratic discussions in the Central Economic Council (CRB-CCE) about the use of indicators for the calculation of the wage standard.

Outcomes of intersectoral negotiations

The period from 1999 to 2008 counts three ambitious agreements (1999-2000, 2001-02 and 2007-08) reflecting a more favourable economic and political context. This optimistic climate is most pronounced in the 2001-2002 intersectoral agreement, where the preamble recalls the foundation of Belgian social compromise, that is a balance of economic and solidarity objectives. It is stated that "the agreement aims more specifically: the maintenance of economic recovery and a fair distribution of the fruits of economic growth among all workers; the harmonic development of labour relations". It is further stated that the goal of the agreement is "a good combination between work and private life through a pragmatic approach"¹⁹ (IPA 2001-2002, p2).

In this period, the indicative wage standard imposing wage moderation on the side of wage-earners, is counterbalanced by two commitments on the side of employers. First, employers promise to create new jobs in exchange for reductions in tax contributions and second, a time schedule is foreseen to improve the continuing training of workers with the goal of an investment of 1,9% of wage mass in continuing training. Trade unions introduced the objective of continuing training to counterbalance employers' focus on competitiveness

¹⁸ "Er mogelijkheid is voor het onderhandelen van een extra en eenmalige groeibonus van 0,4% in de sectoren met goede economische prestaties en ongeveer alle sectoren zich kunnen verheugen over goede prestaties en een aantal zelfs klagen over een schaarste aan voldoende arbeidskrachten; ook de kost van de solidariteitsmaatregelen van dit IPA – gemiddeld 0,2% maar waarvan de juiste draagwijdte volgens de sector kan verschillen- buiten de indicatieve norm kan gehouden worden" (ABVV 2000, p5).

¹⁹ "Het akkoord beoogt meer bepaald : het behoud van het economisch herstel en een billijke verdeling van de vruchten van de economische groei over alle werknemers; een harmonische ontwikkeling van de arbeidsverhoudingen ; het scheppen van meer werkgelegenheidskansen; een goede combinatie tussen arbeid en privé-leven door een pragmatische aanpak en met vrijwaring van de rechten van de werknemers en de functioneringsbehoeften van de bedrijven, in het bijzonder de KMO's ; een betere werking van de arbeidsmarkt door een verhoging van de activiteitsgraad; de voortzetting van de vormingsinspanningen; een studie aanvatten over de verschillen tussen het statuut van de werknemers en dat van de bedienden; meer rechtszekerheid en de vereenvoudiging van allerlei administratieve verplichtingen die een beter klimaat voor het ondernemerschap en initiatief moeten creëren." (IPA 2001-2002, p2).

solely based on wages. They have argued that indicators measuring employers’ efforts regarding training have to be set at the same level as wages and employment indicators. Besides this global commitment of social partners on the basic issues of wages, employment and training, the intersectoral agreements of this period further contain a list of very diverse topics to be treated in the National Labour Council (NAR-CNT), by the government or by lower level negotiations. These topics also include issues related to gender equality measures to improve the work-life balance of workers and the inclusion of vulnerable groups on the labour market.

The agreement of 2003-2004 and the difficult negotiations for 2005-2006 however demonstrate that the resurgence of social compromise was fragile and short. The rather minimal agreement of 2003-2004 was caused by a temporary downturn in the economy. However, the negotiations were relatively short and easy (Krzyszlo 2003). This contrasts with the next negotiations, that were characterised by a much more offensive positioning of employers, specifically around the demand for flexibility. The draft agreement of 2005-06 was eventually rejected by the rank and file of the socialist trade union mainly because the text foresees a doubling of overtime hours (from 65 to 130 hours/ year) and reduces taxes on overtime pay. Despite this rejection, the internally divided government implemented the draft agreement without any changes. The failure of this negotiation round demonstrates the profound disagreement between social partners concerning working time and flexibility: workers’ claim for working time reduction as opposed to employers’ demand for flexibility. This opposition made the 2005-06 negotiations much more difficult than previous ones (Mateo Alaluf in Arcq 2005, p40).

Gender equality outcomes

Two key gender equality issues come on the foreground in this period: work-life balance and pay equality between men and women. These issues are most prominent in the three extensive agreements of 1999-2000, 2001-02 and 2007-08²⁰.

Gender pay equality is raised through appealing sectoral negotiators to tackle gender discrimination by introducing a system of gender neutral function classifications. The reconciliation between work and private life is settled through the introduction of a general right for career break or work time reduction (time credit) and the extension of thematic leave for care reasons. Both topics are discussed more profoundly hereafter.

IPA Signature	%GDP growth*	%Une employ	Federal government	Wage standard/	Gender equality provisions
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²⁰ The agreement of 2003-2004 only contains a reference to work-life balance. The rejected draft agreement of 2005-06 doesn’t mention any progressive gender related item, which maybe reflects the difficult and tense negotiation context. Strangely, this is also the only negotiation round since 1989 with a ‘men-only’ composition of the Group of Ten. Since 1989, the Group of Ten has counted at least one female trade union negotiator except for 2005-06. Nevertheless, there is unanimity on the particularly difficult negotiations that were also heavily mediated, resulting in a real ‘opinion war’ that pushed trade unions in a defensive position (Vandaele & Boucké 2005, p15, see also Arcq 2005; Cortebeek 2005).

date		ment	coalition**	index	
1999-2000 08/12/1998	3,6/ 3,6	8,5 /6,9	Christian-socialist	5.9% Index 0,94 /1,88	Continuing training - women Equal pay - function classification Net minimum wage increase Generalisation of 39h/week
2001-2002 22/12/2000	0,8 / 1,8	6,6/ 7,5	Liberal-socialist- green	6.4 or 7 % Index 2,74 /1,79	Continuing training - women Equal pay - function classification Net increase of low wages New career leave system Paternity leave (10 days) Right for education leave extended to part-time workers Generalisation of 38h/week
2003-2004 17/01/2003	0,8 / 3,6	8,2 /8,4	Liberal-socialist	5.4% Index 1,46 / 1,63	Promotion of career leave for better WLB
2005-2006 draft	2,1 / 2,5	8,5 /8,3	Liberal-socialist	4.5% Index 2,16 /1,76	Draft agreement: Net increase of low wages <i>Flexibility through overtime regulation (max 130h/y)</i>
2007-2008 2/02/2007	3,4 / 0,7	7,5 /7	Liberal-socialist	5.0% Index 1,77 /4,22	Equal pay- function classification Diversity – positive action Revision of CLA 38 & 25 Minimum wage increase Appeal for quality of work- part- time work

Source: Vandekerckhove & Van Gyes 2012, NBB, IPA agreements
* First year of agreement/ second year of agreement
**At moment of negotiations and/or signature

Table 5.3: Intersectoral agreements (1999-2008), economic and political context, wage norm and gender equality provisions

Equal pay and gender-neutral function classification

In the period between 1999-2008, the issue of equal pay and gender neutral function classification appears in three national intersectoral agreements, each time sectors are urged to review their job classification systems with a view to realising equal opportunities for men and women.

The discriminative effect of function classification is a problem that already had been raised in 1975, in CLA 25 on equal pay for women. Moreover, the undervaluation of women's work was already at the origin of the famous women workers strike of 1966, in the arms factory of FN Herstal (see Gubin 2007, Vogel-Polsky 2003). The issue of gender-neutral job evaluation was raised again in the 1990s under influence of the Third action programme on equal opportunities (1991-1995) of the European Commission, and was also included in the EU Employment Guidelines of 1998 (Bruyninckx 1998). The social partners tackled the issue in the 1999-2000 agreement, however this was under pressure of the government and the Minister of Labour and Equal Opportunities Miet Smet²¹, who already took some legal

²¹ A research project subsidized by the European Commission called "from points to coins" was released in 1997. (Van punten naar munten, Onderzoeksproject in het raam van het Vierde Actieprogramma van de Europese Commissie, Ministerie van Tewerkstelling en Arbeid i.s.m. Universiteit Gent, 1997.)

initiatives on the matter (a royal decree and the gendermainstreaming law of 1999). To facilitate the intersectoral negotiations, the federal government had offered reductions of employers' social contributions and taxes in exchange for additional efforts in continuing training and for the revision of function classifications. Despite this tentative of the Minister to make the measure more binding, social partners moved the question of function classifications from the main section of the agreement – containing the commitments with financial implications - to the section of 'secondary' issues. By moving the issue to the second section, the national social partners silently circumvented one of the two engagements and thus reducing the chance of success of the implementation in practice of gender neutral function classifications (Van Noten 1999, p29)²². This reluctance of social partners partly reflects the rigidity of Belgian occupational classifications, not only in relation to gender inequality, but also in the traditional and institutionalised distinction between white-collar and blue-collar workers (Stroobants 1997). Social partners of the sectoral joint committees feared the possible adverse consequences of a revised pay classification system for their (male) rank and file, the considerable costs that both the process and the result of a revision would engender and they sometimes simply lacked the knowledge to accommodate the rather technical process. However, as Van Noten (1999) argues, "even if this is true, it would still not be a 'cost increase', but an (...) impermissible pay discrimination that must be ended as fast as possible" (p35)²³.

CLA 25 was revised twice implementing the intersectoral agreements. In 2008, article 3 of CLA 25 was redrafted obliging all sectors and single enterprises to assess and, when necessary, to correct their job evaluation and classification systems in order to assure gender neutrality as a condition of equal pay. However, no report on the enforcement of Article 3 was foreseen and job classification systems were not made compulsory (Jacqmain 2010, p44). The specialised commission in the National Labour Council (NAR-CNT), foreseen by CLA 25, would be relaunched to inform the social partners, raise their awareness and to lend technical support to the sectoral joint committees, however the commission was not

²² "Even belangrijk echter blijft ook wat er níet (meer) staat. Met name in voornoemd Belgisch actieplan [voor de werkgelegenheid] beloofde de federale regering in "richtsnoer 11: verlaging van de fiscale en parafiscale last op arbeid" in '99 en 2000 telkens minstens 9 miljard fr. op jaarbasis te zullen vrij maken in ruil voor twee engagementen van de sociale partners: bijkomende inspanningen leveren op vlak van permanente vorming; het functieclassificatiesysteem herzien in die sectoren waar het leidt tot ongelijke kansen tussen mannen en vrouwen, dit met het oog op het bewerkstelligen van gelijke kansen. In het nieuwe interprofessioneel akkoord versassen de sociale partners nu de problematiek functieclassificatie van het luik "voorstellen inzake de uitwerking van de lastenverlagingen die door de regering werden beslist" naar het tweede deel "een aantal andere materies". Of m.a.w., men poogt stilletjes onder een van de twee eigen engagementen uit te komen en zo de lastenverlaging binnen te rijven slechts in ruil voor vormingsinitiatieven. De herziening van de functieclassificatiesystemen dreigt hierdoor dode letter te blijven vermits men de politieke stok achter de deur poogt weg te nemen." (Van Noten 1999, p.29)

²³ "nog vóór de eerste recente concretisering van start gingen, werden er reeds ballonnetjes opgelaten dat het bewerkstelligen van een gelijke functieclassificatie voor mannen en vrouwen een (te) dure operatie wordt. Sommigen (...) voorspellen dat het invoeren van niet-discriminerende functieclassificaties twee procent kostenstijging zou meebrengen. Zelfs als dit waar zou zijn, dan nog gaat het niet over een "kostenstijging", maar over een - waarschijnlijk reeds jarenlang volgehouden - ongeoorloofde loondiscriminatie die zo spoedig mogelijk ongedaan dient gemaakt." (Van Noten 1999, p35)

given a permanent structure and was never consulted by the sectoral joint committees (Vervecken et al 2008, p85-86).

In the 2007-08 agreement, the question of function classifications was also linked to the implementation of a European guideline that forbids discrimination based on age (2000/78/EG) (Humblet 2013). This meant that the salary scales that still used age as a wage criterion, had to be revised, this mainly concerning the white collar sectors²⁴. The provision in this agreement thus intended to couple both gender and age neutrality (BBTK 2009).

In this period, the question of gender pay equality gained importance in the public debate through annual campaigns launched by trade unions to raise public awareness, the first 'Equal Pay Day' campaign organised in 2005 (Zijkant & ABVV 2017). Since 2007 the Federal Institute for the Equality of Women and Men publishes an annual 'Pay Gap Report' report based on official statistics, which makes it possible to monitor the evolution of the pay gap. The report shows that the Belgian pay gap diminished between 1999 (28%) and 2014 (20%) by 8 percentage points (based on monthly wages of full-time and part-time employees in the private sector). In international comparisons, Belgium is doing fairly well. However, as Zijkant notes "at this pace, it will take another 37 years to achieve pay equality between women and men. Which is far too long" (Zijkant & ABVV 2017, p3).

After the review of CLA 25 in 2008 (CLA 25ter), the then Minister of Labour and Equal Opportunities (Joëlle Milquet) addressed a letter to the Joint Committees demanding its implementation and proposed to pursue an evaluation of efforts by the end of 2009, and "on the basis of the evaluation of these reports, additional measures can be proposed"²⁵.

The slow progress in the implementation of gender neutral function classification through social dialogue eventually has led to a parliamentary initiative to implement a legally binding procedure. The Law of 22 April 2012 obliges sectors to draw up a gender-neutral and non-discriminatory job classifications if it is not already the case. The law foresees in a clear time schedule, and the service for collective relations of the Ministry of Labour is charged with its verification (Pillinger 2014, p42-3, about the law 2012, see Demagos 2015).

²⁴ "Het is vooral een probleem bij de bedienden", zegt Paul Clerinx, directeur arbeidsverhoudingen bij de werkgeversorganisatie VBO. Zo komen leeftijdsbarema's bijvoorbeeld voor in de bank- en verzekeringssector, in de chemiesector en de metaalsector. Ook het aanvullend paritair comité voor de bedienden, waaronder alle niet sectorspecifieke bedrijven vallen, werkt met leeftijdsbarema's." De Standaard / Christof Vanschoubroek (03/04/2007). Loon op basis van leeftijd mag niet meer. http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dma03042007_003

²⁵ Joëlle Milquet, Nieuwe maatregelen in de strijd tegen de loonkloof tussen vrouwen en mannen. Persbericht 2 april 2009. Personal archive. The text stipulates: "In dit schrijven herinnert Joëlle Milquet aan het belang enerzijds om een sekseneutraal functieclassificatie in te richten en aan de positieve impact hiervan op de loonkloof en anderzijds aan het belang van het gebruik van enkele handige werkinstrumenten zoals een checklist voorgesteld door het Instituut dat sekseneutrale evaluatiesystemen en functieclassificatiesystemen evalueert. Ten slotte stelt de minister de verschillende voorzitters voor een vooruitgangsrapport op te stellen van hun prestaties van nu tot eind juni 2009. Op basis van de evaluatie van die rapporten, kunnen nog bijkomende maatregelen voorgesteld worden."

Working time and career break/leave: individual and collective time reduction

Working time, the quality of life and the reconciliation of work and family life were an important discussion item at the turn of the millennium. Under political pressure of the ambitious plan launched by the Minister of Labour and Equal Opportunities to 'modernise work organisation and working time' which included proposals such as a four-day working week, a 35-hour working week and a system of time credits (Delbar 2000), the issues of working time and the reconciliation of work and family life were integrated by social partners in the 2001-02 intersectoral negotiations to 'model' the measures proposed by the minister, and to reach 'pragmatic solutions' by taking into account the reality on the ground (Delbar 2001). The response of social partners towards government proposals on the reconciliation of work and family life were much more inspired by the preoccupation of preserving their autonomy than promoting gender equality (Jacqmain 2006, p10). Although many of the ministerial proposals were based on proposals of the Socialist trade union and feminist groups at the occasion of the World March of Women launched in March 2000 (De Schampheleire 2000). On the other hand, the issue of working time has traditionally been treated by the social partners, thus government initiatives to reduce working time are situated at the margin of the autonomy of the social partners (Arcq 2001, p33). In the previous decade, the generalisation of the 38 hours working week was vigorously blocked by SME-employers (see Blaise 1993a). From 1999 onwards, it was under political pressure that the union claim was finally introduced by two successive intersectoral agreements²⁶: the 1999–2000 intersectoral agreement reduced the legal maximum for weekly working hours from 40 to 39 hours and the 2001–2 agreement follows the government proposal to reduce working time further to 38 hours.

Measures to improve the work-life balance of workers were adopted by the 2001-02 agreement including a new system of career break/leave (the time credit system), a system of specific leave (e.g. parental leave or leave to care for an ill family member), as well as the extension of the right for paternity leave from three to 10 days.

The new 'time credit' system²⁷ was introduced by a new CLA (nr 77) concluded in the NAR-CNT, and consisted in the right for a time credit of one year to be taken either as a full career break or as a half time or one-fifth working time reductions, with a pro-rata extension of the length in these cases. The period of one year could also be extended by a sectoral agreement. A specific system for very small companies with fewer than 10 workers was introduced, which includes a requirement for the employer's consent for the new forms of time off (Delbar 2001).

²⁶ Time reduction was also accompanied by a reduction in employers' social security contributions for companies reducing working time (Krzyszlo 1999, p43, Arcq 2001, p34).

²⁷ The Belgian time credit system actually covers two dimensions: time credit rights directed towards workers at the end of their career and a general time credit right that gradually has been restricted to time credit for care or training purposes. In what follows I will concentrate on the reconciliation function of time credit and not on the specific end of career dispositions, which also gradually have become stricter.

This new system replaced the previous career break system of 1985 under the 'Recovery Act' that was introduced by the then government to combat unemployment and to strengthen public finances. However, the parliamentary debates of that time demonstrate that the measure was also oriented towards parents allowing them a better reconciliation of work and family duties (Vanderweyden 2002, p6)²⁸. The new time credit system differed from the previous system, in that it now explicitly recognized the reconciliation objective as the new rationale. In this period, the time credit system was seen as responding to the need for more 'relaxed careers' and 'quality of life' in order to increase the employment rate according to the objectives of the active welfare state (Vanderweyden 2002, p29). Moreover, at the express desire of the employers, the new system abolished the replacement requirement of the previous career leave system (De Schampheleire 2001), thus abandoning the initial objectives of combatting unemployment and budget neutrality. The 'replacement requirement' of the previous system made it profitable (or relatively costless) for the social security budget, since the allowance paid to the person taking career leave was compensated by savings in unemployment benefits. However with the economic recovery at the end of the 1990's, in some regions employers complained about the increasing scarcity of qualified job-seekers to replace staff on career leave (Vanderhallen 1998), which influenced the government decision to completely set aside the replacement obligation. The reintroduction of the replacement obligation became a union claim in later negotiations but was never obtained.

A novelty in this period was also that the gender dimension was explicitly addressed (interview trade union officer). The previous system was mainly taken up by women and often hampered their career perspectives when returning to their job. The goal of the new measures was to equalise its utilisation to promote a more equal sharing of care duties. This was most visible in the extension of paternity leave to 10 days, and was also an argument for the substantial increase of the leave-allowance, so to make the system more attractive for both women and men.

Gender mainstreaming of social dialogue

The introduction of the gender mainstreaming approach is also reflected in some provisions that grant attention to gender differences on the labour market. The issues concern continuing training, heavy work, part-time work, diversity and non-discrimination, and low-wage earners.

²⁸ Blaise & Verly already noted in 1990 that the career leave system of 1985 tended to be used for family reasons' instead of facilitating the transition from professional activity to retirement while at the same time creating employment for the young unemployed. They then assess the government measure as a 'mixed' success since only 20 % of the beneficiaries (25.000 workers at the end of 1988) are in the transition to retirement, the system being most successful among young women between 25 and 40 years which make up the majority (60 %) of the beneficiaries of this new system of career leave. (Blaise & Verly 1990, p.33).

Continuing training

This gender analysis is visible in the issue of continuing training. Because indicators demonstrate that women are underrepresented in training, sectors and companies are asked to provide more training for women and other groups such as lower skilled and older workers. Another measure aims to correct the indirect discrimination of women regarding the right to paid education leave. In the agreement of 2001-02 the right for education leave is extended to the previously excluded half-time workers, although the kind of education is in this case limited to professional training during working hours. This provision was an outcome of the EU-directive on part-time work.

Heavy work

Another example is the appendix to the 2007-2008 agreement that introduces some adjustments to the ‘solidarity pact between the generations’. The government launched this ‘generation pact’ in 2005, despite heavy trade union protests. The proposals contained a comprehensive reform of the early retirement system in order to extend the length of careers and thus to improve the employment level of aged workers, in line with European employment goals. In the 2007-08 agreement, social partners propose a wide range of corrections to these reforms. The proposals include corrections in benefit of women workers by taking into account their partial working times and interrupted careers, and the text introduces a discussion on the definition of ‘heavy’ work²⁹, implicitly recognizing its gendered bias. (Krzyszto 2007, p147-148)

Part-time work

Also in 2007-08, part-time work is discussed in the item on work organization and the quality of work. The text foresees that the NAR-CNT will discuss two issues reflecting the demands of both employers and trade unions: a first discussion point relates to the administrative simplification of part-time work, and the second point advocates for the proper application of collective agreement no. 35 (article 4) which stipulates that part-time workers have to be prioritized in the case of a vacancy (‘insofar the person has the necessary qualifications and accepts the timesheet’) (IPA 2007-08, p13). Although this provision is of particular importance of women workers, the issue is not explicitly addressed as such in the text of the agreement.

Diversity and non-discrimination

As part of the 2007 European year for equal opportunities, the 2007-08 agreement recognizes the continuing unequal opportunities on the labour market and appeals sectors and companies to undertake actions for more diversity on the shop floor. The goal was to increase the labour participation of workers of different ethnic origin or sexual orientation,

²⁹ Workers doing heavy work, such as shift and night work can benefit a special regime of early retirement. As of 2017, the discussion between social partners is in its concluding phase. There is clearly a gender dimension attached to this debate. The term of heavy work has later been reframed as the “severity of work” (la pénibilité du travail – penibiliteit van werk) to reflect this consideration.

or persons with a disability, the low educated, elder workers and to contribute to equal opportunities of men and women (IPA 2007-2008, p4).

Low wage earners and the employment trap

Where the previous period was characterised by a gradual growth of the minimum wage, the issue of low wage earners is now tackled from a very different angle: the 'unemployment trap', reflecting a changing approach towards the unemployed and the implementation of the active welfare state that concentrates on the supply side of the labour market. The too small difference between unemployment benefits and the minimum wage is considered as a trap for the unemployed. This leads social partners to ask the government to raise the lowest wages through tax reductions (from 1999 until 2006). In 2007-08, on instigation of trade unions, social partners agree on raising the gross minimum wage (by 50€ in two years), but this increase was also partly financed by government through a tax reduction. This is the first *gross* minimum wage increase since 1993. Although no reference is made to the possible effects on the gender gap, gender officers of trade unions argue that any measure regarding low wage earners will narrow the gender gap because women are overrepresented among low wage earners. This demonstrates an increasing awareness of the importance of sex segregated statistics in labour market policy and professionalization inside trade unions regarding gender equality issues (interview with president of Permanent Labour Commission).

Conclusion

The period from 1999 until 2008 has resulted in two key provisions potentially benefiting gender equality. A new system of career leave was implemented on the national intersectoral level. The system was very successful, although women continued to be the main users during the career while men mostly used the system at the end of their career. The implementation of the new system was not inherently conflictual between social partners, being that employers' organisations were mostly concerned with working organisation and planification. At their demand a procedure for application and other criteria were introduced in the CLA. When the replacement obligation was abolished, the time credit system (the 4/5th regime) potentially became an economy for the company, since the work was often distributed among the rest of the personnel (interview with trade union officer) leading to an increase of productivity.

In contrast with the career leave system that was regulated at the national level, the recommendation for a gender neutral function classification had to be realised by the sectoral social partners. Without enforcing measures or a monitoring system, this provision depended on their willingness to do so, and was thus much more difficult to realize.

Compared to the previous period of specific measures, some of these provisions make proof of a certain equality awareness on the part of negotiators, on some specific issues identified as impacting on women. However such a gender analysis was not systematically applied on all bargaining issues (interview gender equality officer), nor on the core issues. For example,

the issue of work-family balance was not addressed in relation to the introduction of flexibility measures in 2005-06, when the annual limit for using overtime was increased from 65 to 130 hours' overtime, and the federal government reduced the cost of these overtime hours "in order to make best use of the opportunity to increase flexible working" (Demetriades et al. 2006, p10).

5.4. Social dialogue and gender equality after 2008

Since the outbreak of the financial and economic crisis in 2008, the economic and political context has become increasingly difficult for national intersectoral social dialogue. The crisis of 2008 exacerbated the trend towards wage moderation and increased government intervention in collective bargaining which was institutionalised by the 1996 law with the goal of safeguarding employment and the competitiveness of the Belgian economy. Between 2009 and 2017, only two biannual intersectoral agreements have received support of all social partner organisations, the first signed just after the outbreak of the crisis but qualified as ‘an exceptional agreement’ given the exceptional political and economic circumstances (Capron, Conter & Faniel 2013). The second was recently concluded, at the beginning of 2017, when the economy has started to recover.

Since 2011, the room for negotiation on pay has nearly stalled, leaving only marginal space for wage increases (0.3% for the years 2011-2012, a wage freeze between 2013 and 2015). In this period, negotiations in the Group of Ten ended twice with a draft agreement. However in 2011, the draft was rejected by the liberal and socialist trade union³⁰, and in 2015 an agreement was concluded without the support of the socialist trade union that had left the negotiation table. In 2013, trade unions refused to start negotiations for an intersectoral agreement in the context of a government imposed wage stop. Nevertheless, negotiations in the National Labour Council and the Group of Ten resulted in ‘common answers of the social partners to questions of the government’, but these ‘partial agreements’ were not submitted to the democratic consultation and approval of the constituencies of social partner organisations since they were not qualified as an intersectoral agreement (ACV 2015, p8). The period from 2012 is also characterised by strong workers’ resistance against austerity measures and social security reforms implemented by the two last governments, resulting in a long sequence of public actions, manifestations and national ‘political’ strikes (Conter, Demertzis & Faniel 2015). Union protests received large support of civil society organisations, also from women organisations that launched a Feminist socio-economic platform on 8 March 2012 to denounce the detrimental impact of austerity measures and social security reforms on the economic and social position of women (Furia 2014, Vie Féminine 2017).

In 2016, the wage freeze was lifted by government, however at the same time the 1996 law was revised by making the wage norm stricter (see the introductory chapter on Belgian IR). Since a new centre-right political coalition was installed in October 2014, the negotiation agenda of social partners has strongly been determined by government initiatives in areas that traditionally belong to the autonomy of social partners (e.g. the Law on Workable and Flexible Work of 1 February 2017).

³⁰ The core bargaining issue in the negotiations of 2011-12 was the ‘harmonisation’ of the statute of blue collar and white collar workers, which should eventually lead to the introduction of a unitary statute. Despite the the persistent deadlock between social partners, the (resigning) government introduced its mediatory proposal by law (Capron et al. 2013).

Gender equality during austerity

Respondents of trade unions contend that progress on gender equality in national social dialogue has nearly stalled. Many measures that are introduced by the government have often regressive effects on (gender) equality. Many refer to the reduction of the allowance for low wage part-time workers, the pension reform that will particularly affect women with incomplete careers,... It is beyond the scope of this chapter to give a picture of the outcomes of this social concertation (in the broadest sense) nor of the extensive reforms that have been introduced in labour law by the government in this period³¹. The research methodology used for the previous two periods, which existed in a focus on provisions adopted by intersectoral agreements (IPA/AIP), has become less appropriate for the post-2008 period. Since negotiations for intersectoral agreements proved difficult in the context of nearly zero wage growth, national intersectoral social dialogue often happened outside the framework of an 'intersectoral agreement' (IPA/AIP). However, all respondents emphasize that, despite the difficult context, social dialogue has continued both within the 'informal' Group of Ten and in the two formal structures of social dialogue (National Labour Council and Central Economic Council). Therefore, I will focus on three issues in the following presentation of findings. The first two sections present the development of two provisions that were decided on in the previous period: the reform of the career leave system ('time credit') and the goal of equal pay in the context of an imperative wage standard. Third, a 'novel' provision of this period is presented, that is the budget for 'welfare adjustments of social allowances'.

Table 5.3. presents an overview of the political and economic context of this period with an overview of the gender equality provisions in the (draft) intersectoral agreements between 2009-2017.

The budget for 'welfare adjustments of social allowances'

Some measures specifically benefiting gender equality have been introduced through the budget for 'welfare adjustments of social allowances'. This is an opinion of social partners directed to the government on the spending of this budget, which is included as an attachment to the intersectoral agreements. This budget has permitted among others, to improve the allowance for pregnant women that preventively have to stop working (in 2009-10), and most recently, the 'time credit' allowance for single parents has been increased using this budget, in order to make the system more attractive for this particularly vulnerable group of workers, who are in large majority women. Social partners also agreed to override a previous discrimination in pensions between full careers and incomplete careers, which was introduced by the government in a previous welfare adjustment. This decision disproportionately affected the already low women's pensions, because women have more 'inactive' periods resulting in incomplete careers. Trade unions emphasize that such a different treatment is unjust, because when these women workers had entered the labour

³¹ For a general overview of labour law reforms, see Clauwaert, Schömann, Büttgen, & Rasnača (2016); for a gender analysis, see Furia 2014, *Vie Féminine* 2017.

market, child care structures were much less developed than actually, resulting in young mothers temporarily interrupting their careers. It would thus be unfair to discriminate them in the welfare adjustment of pension allowances.

IPA Signature date	%GDP growth*	%Unemployment	Federal government coalition**	Wage standard/ index	Gender equality provisions and references
2009-2010 22/12/2008	-2,3 / 2,7	7,9 / 8,3	Christian-Liberal-socialist (1)	250 EUR Index 0,59 / 1,67	Pregnant working women Adaptation of career leave
2011-2012 draft	1,8 / 0,1	7,2 / 7,6	Christian-Liberal-socialist (1) °	0.3% Index 3,06 / 2,65	Draft agreement: No equality provisions
2013-2014 No agreement	-0,1/ 1,7	8,4 / 8,5	Christian-Liberal-socialist	0% Index 1,25 / 0,4	Partial agreements: Net increase of low wages Abolition of (lower) youth wages
2015-2016 draft	1,5 / 1,2	8,5 / 7,8	Liberal-flemish-christian	0,5 + 0,3% index jump of 2% Index 1,05 / 2,1	Draft agreement: <i>Adaptation of career leave</i>
2017-2018 2/02/2017	1,5/1,7 ^a	7,6 / 7,4 ^a	Liberal-flemish-christian	1,1% ^b	Increased career leave allocation for single parents Discrimination in pension allocation lifted In NAR-CNT: <i>Adaptation of career leave</i>

Source: Hiva studie, NBB, IPA agreements
* First year of agreement/ second year of agreement
**At moment of negotiations and/or signature
° Descending government
1 French socialist party (PS) only (without Flemish socialist party SPa)
^a forecast EC
^b from 2017 onwards the wage norm doesn't include automatic indexation (new wage law)

Table 5.3: Intersectoral agreements, economic and political context, wage norm and gender equality provisions (2009-2017)

Various unions respondents also emphasize that, in a strict legal sense, this budget proposal shouldn't be included in the intersectoral agreement, since the CRB-CCE and NAR-CNT are officially mandated by the government to submit a proposal at the latest on 15 September³², thus largely before the negotiations in the Group of Ten take an end (or even start).

However, in recent years, the welfare adjustment budget has been coupled with intersectoral negotiations by the employers' organisations. In the most recent 2017-18 agreement, the welfare adjustment budget has actually become the symbolic solidarity objective of intersectoral agreements, symbolising the solidarity between workers and the inactive and unemployed (or 'insiders' and 'outsiders'). Critics however contend that the

³² Articles 5, 6, 72, 73, 73 bis and ter of the Law of 23 December 2005 providing for a Solidarity Pact between the Generations, and establishing a structural mechanism of welfare adjustment for social benefits.
http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/loi/change_lg.pl?language=nl&la=N&table_name=wet&cn=2005122330

increase of allowances with a few percentage points are not enough to combat poverty among benefit recipients, and that social partners should be much more ambitious in relation to unemployment and to create a more inclusive world of work³³.

Career leave during austerity

When a new federal government was installed at the end of 2011 (after 535 days of political crisis) one of its first austerity measures concerned the reform of the time credit system that existed since 2002. The length of time credit was shortened and a distinction between justified and unjustified career leave was introduced, where justified career leave mainly concerns care motivations for children and elderly. Again, in 2015, the new centre-right government modified the system by toughening up the rules on 'unjustified' career leave. At the end of 2016, another revision was negotiated in the National Labour Council (NAR/CNT), at the Government's request, since the regulation of career leave is partially arranged by a CLA. This last revision contained both improvements and suppressions of rights for career leave, with the unmotivated career leave being suppressed in exchange for the extension and 'modernisation'³⁴ of justified career leave. Despite these recent improvements, there has been a major shift in focus compared to the system that was created in 2001 (NVR 2015, Clauwaert et al 2016, Clauwaert & Schömann 2013, Ajzen 2015).

In 2001, an individual right for career leave for *all* workers was introduced, as the Socialist union argued, so "it would not depend on the agreement of the employer nor would it have to be justified with arguments pertaining to the employee's private life" (in De Schampheleire 2000). At that moment, it was explicitly recognised that the goal for such a career leave could extend care reasons. The system that was gradually introduced since 2011 takes another perspective, and clearly focuses on care for small children (under 8 years) and sick or elder persons³⁵.

The reactions of social partners on these government imposed reforms are – unsurprisingly – quite the opposite. Trade unions generally regret the reduction in career leave rights and its focus on care, which will in majority attract women. Employers on the other hand, acknowledge that recent reforms are mainly inspired by budget saving considerations, "where societal choices had to be made" (interview with general manager of employers' organisation).

"It has been decided, for the society: 'look, we will no longer subsidize part-time work', because whichever way you look at it, time credit is part-time work. People don't take it full time, all people

³³ De Standaard (2017/01/17). Van Kapitaal Belang: Hip hip hoera voor IPA! (Zeker weten?) by Ive Marx http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20170116_02677774;

³⁴ The new system (CLA 103) extends rights for cohabitants (non-married persons), and it will be possible to take parental leave by reducing working time by 1/10th (before this was only full-time, half-time or 1/5th).

³⁵ Since 2015, participation in a recognised course is also recognised as a reason for career leave (Clauwaert et al 2016, p3). Since the reform of 2012, there also exists a system of end-of-career leave, this will however not be treated here.

take it part-time, and mostly in one-fifth regimes.” (interview with adviser of employers’ organisation)

Employers further regret that regarding work-life balance, politicians and trade unions focus too much on improving the attractiveness of career leaves and their extension, while not recognizing that it is a potential trap for women. By putting their career on hold it is an important cause of the gender wage gap. As an alternative, it is argued that more company-specific and tailored measures should be promoted, such as flexible working arrangements (interview with adviser of employers’ organisation).

Trade unions and employers however agree on the fact that more men should take parental leave, gender roles should be addressed by education and the importance of child care initiatives.

Equal pay and the wage standard

On 8 March 2012, a new law was voted in the federal parliament to combat the gender wage gap. This law specifically addresses social dialogue on the company, sectoral and intersectoral level. It implements a procedure for the revision of sectoral function classifications including a clear timeline for monitoring the implementation of the procedure. At company-level, employers with more than 50 employees, should make a two-yearly analysis of their pay structure, which will be discussed in the company’s Work Council. They are encouraged to produce an action plan with concrete measures to foster a gender-neutral management (Group S 2015, p8).

The execution of the new equal pay law became insecure in the context of the government imposed wage freeze starting in 2013, leaving almost no room for collective (wage) bargaining. Should the recalibration of wages in order to rectify wage discrimination after the implementation of a new gender-neutral function classification be counted as a wage cost in the wage standard or not? This question of the possible incompatibility of the wage standard with wage equality measures was already raised at the moment of the writing of the law of 1996. However there was no agreement in the government to include this provision. As a result, the voted law remained silent on the question³⁶ (interview with Head of department of Collective Labour Relations Administration).

When this incompatibility was raised again in 2013 by the trade unions, the public administration clarified the situation by releasing a list of cases that administratively would not be counted in the wage standard³⁷. This list thus states that measures that are taken to close the gender gap in response to the law combating the gender pay gap would be permissible (Group S 2015, p8). This list of administrative exemptions didn’t met employers’

³⁶ The then Minister of Labour and Social emancipation Miet Smet wanted to include such a provision. Declaring her personal opinion, she emphasized the social dimension of this question: "unequal appreciation creates a fundamental inequality between workers that, from a social point of view, needs to be corrected. In my opinion, the possible cost increases must be left out of the wage standard" (Bruyninckx 1998).

³⁷ This list is named the ‘note Cox’ after the name of the head of the administration.

resistance during the years that the wage norm was fixed at 0% because it opened possibilities to bargain on some of these exemptions in sectors where there was some space to negotiate (interview with trade union officer, see also Group S, 2015).

This attitude changes when in 2017 the wage standard is fixed at 1,1%. In this new constellation, employers' organizations negate the validity of the administration's list of items that will not lead to a sanction if the wage standard is exceeded. On the other hand, the administration has notified the joint committees that the list will continue to be valid.

The fear of employers is beyond the issue of gender equality. They mostly fear that other equalisations, such as in case of restructuring, or the harmonisation between white and blue-collar workers would not be counted in the wage standard (interview General Manager of Employers' organisation).

Since the law of 1996, the claim for gender neutral function classification has become intertwined with the wage standard, and consequently, gender equality is regarded as a 'cost' that employers don't want to bear on top of the wage standard. Also inside trade unions, there is resistance to the implementation because it would be to the detriment of a general wage increase. The smaller the room for negotiations on a wage standard became, the more difficult it was for social partners to agree on its usage to combat inequalities. The 2017-18 agreement provides a 1,1% wage standard that is legally binding, which must be distributed among different groups of workers, leading to greater tensions.

The role of the government in this is also remarkable. By leaving the question unclear, the state puts all the pressure on the trade unions, or, on the bargaining relationship. Although legally, discrimination should in any case be lifted: here it is visible that the economic motivations of the state conquer over the equality principle.

6. Discussion: Are national intersectoral agreements a lever for gender equality?

This chapter summarizes the findings of this study and responds to the research questions. A first section summarizes and discusses the outcomes of the intersectoral agreements. Second and third sections present the external and internal factors that had impact on the scope of collective bargaining in general and its equality potential in particular. A fourth section discusses the problem of implementation and monitoring.

6.1. Outcomes of intersectoral agreements

During the period of study, three periods of gender equality bargaining have been distinguished. In a first period (1986-1996), gender provisions centred on specific measures enabling women to enter or stay on the labour market (child care infrastructures) and to have access to promotion (education and training, positive actions). An economic context demanding for (flexible) women's labour has enabled these provisions, as well as political pressure on social partners to address the question of women's labour. The Commission for Women's Labour provided a space where social partners and gender experts could prepare specific claims and exchange their opinions. The presence of the first woman negotiator among the Group of Ten is probably also a facilitative factor. The specific measures that have been proposed in this period didn't encounter specific resistance of employers. The limited success of positive actions for women in the private sector point to an 'implementation gap' in the case of voluntary provisions for lower level negotiations.

In a second period, two key trade union claims, equal pay and work-life balance have become central. The demand for equal pay has concentrated on the introduction of gender neutral function classifications. The provision is introduced as a recommendation in the intersectoral agreement, despite political pressure to make it more binding. Implementation of this provision was not straightforward in the context of the 1996 law imposing a wage standard. The recommendation is repeated in subsequent agreements, but eventually a binding procedure is introduced through the Equal Pay Law of 2012. In the agreement of 2001-02, a right for career leave is introduced by the 'time credit' system, with the goal of a better reconciliation of work and private life. This signifies a major shift in objective, since the previous career leave system aimed to combat unemployment. Again under political pressure, employers accept this system of 'individual working time reduction' to prevent the introduction of a general work time reduction (35 hours working week as in France) by the then Minister of Work. The right for career leave at the moment of introduction is not yet conditional to 'justified' care needs thus potentially benefiting every worker (although specific care leaves were also created in this period). Although the objective of the new system is also to incite more men to take on care duties, the results of the new system have been mixed: women tend to take career leave in the middle of their career, while men take it at the end of their career leave.

A third period, starting in 2008 with the outbreak of the financial and economic crisis, has stopped progress on new gender equality provisions. Initially, crisis measures are introduced to avoid redundancies in the industrial (male) sectors that are first affected by the crisis. However, when a new government is installed at the end of 2011, austerity measures are introduced in social security and public services. Trade unions and civil society organisations have protested massively against these measures, while women organisations have emphasized the disproportionate impact of austerity on the economic and social position of women and other disfavoured groups. In this period, the margin for wage increases is nearly zero, which potentially conflicts with the implementation of the Equal Pay Law of 2012. An administrative note (the 'note Cox') however stipulates that wage increases linked to the Equal pay law will not be sanctioned. From the end of 2011, the general right for career leave is partially dismantled for budgetary reasons. The right is gradually restricted to 'justified' motivations, which are mainly related to care. Most recently, the right for career leave is modernised to reflect new family compositions and the allowance for single parents has substantially been increased.

In response to the first research question, we can conclude from this analysis that gender equality has gained importance in the outcomes of intersectoral negotiations until the agreement of 2007-08. In a first period of mostly special measures, the second period consists in a gender proofing of certain issues still identified as particularly affecting women (such as training and part-time work). The recommendation for equal pay addresses gender disadvantage in function classifications through a (voluntary) recommendation to the sectoral and company level negotiations.

The economic crisis signifies a turning point in this evolution towards more gender sensitivity in social concertation, which is also visible in the austerity measures implemented by the government. It has become much more difficult to include the goal of gender equality in the agenda of national social dialogue. It has largely been removed from the agenda. In the context of the economic crisis, gender equality is "perceived as a luxury compared to other claims" (interview with trade union official). During last negotiations in the beginning of 2017, despite the law of 2012 and the modified law of 1996, the intersectoral agreement is silent on the gender pay gap, but also on other solidarity and equality claims, such as the minimum wage, employment measures, or specific actions towards people from a migrant background, as was recommended by the European Commission³⁸.

³⁸ On this question, the European Commission recommended to the Belgian government and the social partners to take initiatives towards people from a migrant background. This recommendation was not captured in the latest IPA-AIP. The EC's second recommendation (out of three) states: "Carry out the intended review of the 'Law of 1996' on competitiveness and employment in consultation with the social partners. Ensure that wages can evolve in line with productivity. Ensure the effectiveness of labour market activation policies. Move forward with education and vocational training reforms and provide training support, notably for people from a migrant background." (EC 2016, p7)

6.2. External factors impacting on national social dialogue

This research confirms earlier findings on inhibitive and facilitative factors impacting on equality bargaining (Williamson 2010, Williamson & Baird 2014, Berg & Piszczek 2014). Both external and internal factors can be distinguished. The first are discussed in this section, the internal factors are discussed in the next section. This case study of national intersectoral social dialogue highlights the way the historical- institutional (Dean 2015; Rubery & Fagan 1995), economic (Briskin 2014a, Pillinger 2014), and political context (Colling & Dickens 1998, Gregory & Milner 2009) influences the possibilities and outcomes for equality bargaining. Each of these elements will be discussed further.

As we saw in the introduction, Belgium is a rather unique case in Europe. Since the end of the Second World War, social dialogue has been strongly institutionalised at national, sectoral and company level, reaching now an almost full coverage rate, and trade unions have maintained their relatively high levels of membership figures. The framework of an intersectoral agreement sets a floor of basic pay and working conditions for all workers, and enforces the bargaining position of workers in small sectors, or sectors with low wages or stiff competition (including the automatic adaptation of wages to the rise of living costs - the indexation system). For employers, this institutionalised system prevents unfair competition and social dumping, and guarantees social peace and a positive climate for social dialogue at lower levels when an intersectoral agreement is reached. This coordinated and well-developed system of social dialogue has an inherently equality potential, by giving voice to workers. This institutionalised equality potential of Belgian social dialogue was not specifically investigated, but during interviews, social partners referred to this. A trade union official states that: “When there is a strong collective bargaining power in the company, in the sector and on the intersectoral level, there is a far better guarantee for not having a pay gap, because the union delegates in the company ensure that function classifications are used, that no benefits are assigned only to men or only to women, etc.. (...) The fact that we are present at all levels, guarantees in a way that there are progressions on the measures taken.” Another trade union officer contends that since the 1990’s, investments have been made to increase the coverage rate of sectoral collective bargaining by establishing active joint committees in previously uncovered sectors such as the non-profit, the liberal professions, the social and payroll services,... resulting in an almost complete coverage. An employers’ representative confirms that the often criticized Belgian centralized wage policies also has its merits, because it offers “certain guarantees that these elements are free of gender [bias] (...) although I don’t argue to control everything centrally”.

Over the three decades of study, the economic context has been crucial. In years with a temporary economic downturn, no or less ambitious equality provisions appeared in the agreements, while in the years that the economy is in need of labour, there is generally more negotiation room for trade unions in general and for solidarity provisions. In periods of

labour shortages, employers are more open for provisions towards women and other disfavoured groups.

The political context has influenced collective bargaining in two ways. First, by determining the legal framework of bargaining (the 1996 law and the Equal Pay Law of 2012) and second, the agenda-setting role of the government (through a government declaration, law proposals, declarations,...). Over the last three decades, the political context has strongly influenced the power balance between labour and capital. The wage standard law of 1996, constrained the bargaining power of Belgian unions by law, and incorporated the wage evolution of neighbouring countries (and particularly the wage evolution of Germany) in Belgian wage bargaining (Humblet 2013). This tendency to constrain wage bargaining has considerably increased since the crisis of 2008 and with the new wage law adopted in 2017. The political influence on wage bargaining is in a direction that puts employers in a comfortable position. For example, in exchange of the wage norm, no restrictions have been imposed on employers to invest their profits in a certain way or to introduce worker's representation in SME enterprises (Humblet 2013). There is also an increasing influence of the European Commission on Belgian social dialogue, with the Treaty of Maastricht, the introduction of the EMU and the notion of competitiveness. On the other hand, the Belgian IR system has been relatively resilient under these political and economic pressures. The tendency of decentralisation in the 1980s has partially stopped and trade unions have revised their strategies at various moments, for example through the introduction of new items on the bargaining agenda such as continuing training but also work-life balance provisions.

However, politics can also play an enabling role. What is clear in the first and second period, thus before the crisis of 2008, is that political actors, both at the national and European level, have played a crucial role in supporting gender equality issues on the bargaining table of intersectoral negotiations. Gender equality bargaining is thus dependent on both the power balance of trade unions in negotiations and on the presence of feminist or progressive political actors willing to put some pressure on social partners to take gender equality initiatives. However, feminist political actors failed to put gender equality objectives on the same level as economic objectives. This is for example visible in the law of 1996 that doesn't pronounce itself on the issue of equal pay, leaving the question dependent on the bargaining power of trade unions at the different levels of negotiations. Although the administrative note provides some arguments for negotiators to negotiate for equal pay initiatives in the framework of the 2012 Equal pay law.

Another factor specifically impacting on national level negotiations are the ideological and discursive struggles over social and economic priorities. National level bargaining operates at the same level of national politics, so ideological debates also determine the opportunity structure for equality bargaining. Here, the effects on gender equality seem mixed. On the one hand, trade unions have certainly loosed power in the era of neoliberalism and the

austerity imperative of Europe. At the other hand, the discursive climate for gender equality has gained importance since the 1990's. However scholars point to the partial and bended way of addressing gender equality, particularly in the European context (Lombardo, Meier & Verloo 2010), with the risk of becoming merely symbolic (Jacquot 2015, p181). There is also increasing public attention for rising inequality, precarious work, and poverty. The positive role of collective bargaining is recognized, albeit contradictory, by the same economic institutions that are promoting budget austerity and economic liberalism. This discursive struggle on equality was also noticeable in the interviews of the case study, with diverging stresses on the causes of the gender pay gap, but also by a questioning of the gender mainstreaming strategy, when 'costs' are involved. An employer's representative stated in the interview: "What is a gender lens? This is addressed by saying: 'as many women shall be subject to this measure, so the measure has a big effect on women, so there is a gender problem'. While it is not examined what the underlying causes are: why? So, simply the observation that many or few women are subject to this measure, in fact it doesn't contribute much to the discussion for me."

6.3. Internal factors: the bargaining process and relationship

Earlier studies have stressed the importance of the bargaining process (Hart 2002, Dawson 2014) and, the process of interest definition (Munro 2001), the setting of bargaining priorities (Britwum et al. 2012). From this case study of the national level bargaining it emerges that peak level bargaining happens at a much larger distance between negotiators and the rank and file, with intermediary levels impacting on the decision of bargaining priorities and second, the challenge to reconcile the sometimes very different interests of sectoral organisations. A third point is the discretion of top level negotiators, their margin of negotiation, what Heery (2006) has named the 'voice' and 'choice' model. The discretion of negotiators can be rather limited at some moments or in relation to specific issues, becoming 'spokespersons', or the mandate can be larger, which is maybe also dependent on factors such as trust, legitimacy and leadership, factors that are also gendered. The setting of bargaining priorities is thus dependent on the mandate negotiators receive from their base. In the case of *intersectoral* social dialogue, this intra-organisational dynamic questions both the vertical internal democracy, between the top and the 'base', but also the horizontal democracy: that is, between strong and weak sectors or between female and male sectors (see Briskin 2006). This also relates to the role, power and legitimacy of trade union gender equality officers and women's constituencies in the process of bargaining.

How can we assess this process evolution over time, in relation with the external contextual factors? First, from the interviews, it seems that there is a connection between the discretion of negotiators and the economic and political climate: the less room for negotiation, the more the agenda is limited to wage bargaining (the wage standard) and equality provisions (such as the minimum wage, employment for disfavoured groups or gender equality) seem to be dropped from the agenda. As a trade union official stated: "The same thing for this intersectoral agreement. Yes, everybody is conscious, yes,

everybody talks about it, yes, everybody agrees, but when the moment of decision arrives, arbitration must be done, we know what takes precedence. That's the problem." Another trade union officer confirms this impression: "It's a change of approach! In the list of claims, the gender aspect is included, just as the minimum wage is! But it is not the priority; the priority is the wage norm."

A second evolution, is the declining influence role of the Women's Labour Commission in the preparation of gender equality claims. From the interviews it came out that in the 1990's and in 2000s, external feminist networks have played a role in influencing or preparing negotiations. This seems to have cooled off in recent times, due to two evolutions. First, a growing internal professionalization and expertise of trade unions in relation to gender mainstreaming, and second, the declining role of the Permanent Labour Commission (previously the Women's Labour Commission), as a result of the retreat of employers and furthermore due to declining budgets and personnel to support this Commission.

6.4. Implementation and monitoring

A recurring question in equality bargaining studies is to what extent are the outcomes of collective bargaining implemented in practice, which counts even more in the case of framework agreements that must be implemented at sectoral and company level. How can be prevented that equality provisions in agreements are only 'empty shells' (Gregory & Milner 2009). This points to the problem of 'soft law' recommendations, which often lack enforceability. In the interviews it was often referred to the CLA on part-time work whose application is sometimes failing.

On the other hand, recommendations play an important role in agenda-setting, creating an opportunity structure for union negotiators at lower levels. However, the opportunity structure must be recognised as such, and is dependent on the engagement and know-how of lower level negotiators. A study conducted by the Christian trade union about gender equality bargaining in sectoral negotiations pointed in its conclusion to the important role of the national intersectoral level in agenda-setting and awareness raising to promote sectoral equality bargaining (Liagre, Damhuis, Van Gyes, Valenduc & Lamberts 2010, p72).

An example in this case study is the slow introduction of gender function classification, whose implementation encountered resistance in the context of wage moderation, thus strongly depending on the willingness of sectoral social partners, leading to an uneven implementation. Thus eventually leading to the adoption of the 2012 law, which confirms the continued importance of legislation on gender equality and the role of state actors.

It also resulted from this study that the provision of monitoring in the wording of the agreement, can be part of the bargaining process and power relationship. If no monitoring is foreseen by a formal institution such as the NLC, it depends on the capacity of the individual organisations to monitor the agreement.

7. Concluding remarks

The methodology of this research consisted in a triangulation of semi-structured 'expert' interviews and an examination of written sources. This methodology permitted to overcome some encountered problems during such research, such as the lack of readily available monitoring documents on gender equality provisions and the sometimes opaque process that national social dialogue seemed to me. I also noticed that the intersectoral agreements are not considered as an opportunity structure by the Belgian women's movement, leaving the initiative in the hands of internal pressure groups in the trade unions. Maybe an important lesson of this study is the importance of past feminist alliances in preparing an equality agenda, however, with very mixed results. As a gender equality officer testifies, many items on the 'wish list' of women's constituencies hardly reached the final agreements, or only as soft recommendations, for example in the case of part-time work. Blaise and Verly (1990) already noticed in 1990 that there is a noticeable evolution in the subject matter of intersectoral negotiations. They notice that everything that is related with the different aspects of the precarisation of work tends to be taken out of what is negotiable. This is the case for temporary work and part-time work (p39)³⁹

This study was limited in its scope to the national intersectoral level, and to the outcomes of intersectoral agreements. Further research could broaden our knowledge on equality bargaining by researching intra-organisational dynamics, such as the dynamics between the intersectoral, sectoral and company-level, comparing different sectors, and to contribute to the monitoring of (gender) equality provisions in order to determine future union strategies. The focus of this study was also on *gender* equality, future research could analyse collective bargaining provisions directed to other disfavoured groups, for example towards young workers, the unemployed, or to workers with a foreign origin. How have strong and weak sectors implemented (gender) equality provisions? What have been the effects?

From a gender mainstreaming perspective, it would be interesting to adopt a longitudinal thematic analysis on provisions related to flexibility and part-time work, the gendered effects of the economic crisis, its effects on the restructuring of collective bargaining.

Another point of reflection and for future research, are the structural limits of solidaristic wage formation at an intersectoral level, which depends on productivity growth and economic growth (Cassiers & Denayer 2010, p12). It would be interesting to study this from a gender equality angle, or a 'precarity' angle, by comparing strong and weak sectors, or

³⁹« Une première réflexion a trait aux évolutions perceptibles en ce qui concerne l'objet des négociations. Il semble, notamment au vu de la mise en œuvre du dernier accord interprofessionnel que, dans la période récente, ce qui touche aux différentes facettes de la précarisation du travail a tendance à sortir du champ du négociable, du conventionnel pour devenir contractuel. Il en va ainsi, par exemple, de l'évolution des réglementations relatives au travail intérimaire (loi du 24 juillet 1987) et du travail à temps partiel (loi-programme du 22 décembre 1989). » (Blaise & Verly 1990, p.39)

male and female sectors. These studies and reflections could contribute to the determination of union strategies in order to extend the bargaining agenda from its current focus on pay bargaining to working or living conditions.

This study has pointed to some limitations and challenges of equality bargaining in the contemporary political and economic context. National intersectoral level is the level that is potentially most favourable for solidarity and equality between strong and weak sectors and between the employed and unemployed. However there exists no solidarity mechanism in wage bargaining that distributes productivity increases among high productivity sectors and sectors with lower productivity. This questions the meaning of interpersonal and intersectoral solidarity and equality, and eventually that of strategic reflection on the goals of collective bargaining and social concertation, and on the goals and strategy of workers' collective action.

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ABVV-FGTB: Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond - Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique
[Belgian General Federation of Labour]

ACLVB-CGSLB: Centrale Générale des Syndicats Libéraux de Belgique
[Federation of Liberal Trade Unions of Belgium]

ACV-CSC: Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens de Belgique
[Confederation of Christian Trade Unions]

CAO - CCT: Collectieve Arbeidsovereenkomst - Convention Collective de Travail
[CLA: Collective Labour Agreement]

CRB- CCE: Centrale Raad voor het Bedrijfsleven - Conseil Centrale de l'Economie
[Central Economic Council]

CVA-CTF: Commissie Vrouwenarbeid - Commission du Travail des Femmes
[Commission for Women's Labour]

EC: European Commission

Eurofound: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

ETUC : European Trade Union Confederation

EU: European Union

FCUD-FESC: Fonds voor Collectieve Uitrustingen en Diensten - Fonds des Equipements et Services Collectifs
[Childcare fund]

FOD WASO – SPF Emploi: FOD Werkgelegenheid, Arbeid en Sociaal Overleg/ SPF Emploi, Travail et Concertation sociale
[Federal Public Service ('Ministry') for Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue]

IGVM-IEFH: Instituut van de Gelijkheid van Vrouwen en Mannen/ Institut de l'égalité des femmes et des hommes
[Institute for the Equality of Women and Men]

ILO: International Labor Organisation

IPA-AIP: Interprofessioneel Akkoord / Accord Interprofessionnel
[Intersectoral Agreement]

IR: Industrial Relations

KB- AR: Koninklijk Besluit - Arrêté Royal

[RD: Royal Decree]

NAR-CNT : Nationale Arbeidsraad - Conseil National du Travail

[National Labour Council]

NBB-BNB: Nationale Bank van België - Banque nationale de Belgique

[National Bank of Belgium]

OECD : Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PC - CP: Paritaire Comité - Commission Paritaire

[Joint Committee]

RGKMV-CECHF : Raad van de Gelijke Kansen voor Mannen en Vrouwen - Conseil de l'Egalité des Chances entre Hommes et Femmes

[Council for Equal Opportunities between Men and Women]

SME: Small and Medium sized enterprises

UCM: Union Classes Moyennes

[Union of the Middle Classes]

UNIZO: Unie van Zelfstandige Ondernemers (previously **NCMV:** Nationaal Christelijk Middenstandsverbond)

[Union of Self-Employed Entrepreneurs]

VBO-FEB: Verbond Belgische Ondernemingen – Fédération des Entreprises de Belgique

[Federation of Belgian Enterprises]

Sources and References

1. List of Interviews

1	Trade union – former Gender Equality Officer ABVV- FGTB	24/02/2017
2	Trade union– Gender Equality Officer ACV-CSC	28/02/2017
3	President National Labour Council NAR-CNT	2/03/2017
4	Trade union – Gender Equality Officer ABVV- FGTB	3/03/2017
5	Trade union officer – Head of Studies Dept. ACV-CSC	14/03/2017
6	Trade union officer – Head of Studies Dept. ABVV- FGTB	15/03/2017
7	Public services – Gender Equality Institute Officer IGVM	20/03/2017
8	Trade union officer –Studies Dept. ACLVB-CGSLB	27/03/2017
9	Trade union officer – former Head of Studies Dept. ABVV- FGTB	29/03/2017
10	Trade union official ABVV- FGTB	30/03/2017
11	President of Permanent Labour Commission of the Council for Equal Opportunities between Men and Women	6/04/2017
12	Public services – Head of department and two public servants Of the Collective Labour Relations Administration at the Federal Public Service for Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue	6/04/2017
13	Trade union official ACV-CSC	7/04/2017
14	Employers’ organisation Adviser– Studies Dept. - Unizo	11/04/2017
15	Former trade union official - ABVV- FGTB	21/04/2017
16	Employers’ organisation - General Manager and Senior Adviser – VBO-FEB	2/05/2017
17	Former trade union official - ABVV- FGTB	8/05/2017

Interviews in Dutch	10
Interviews in French	7
Total	17

Respondents	Men	Women	Total
ABVV-FGTB	2	5	7
ACV-CSC	1	2	3
ACLVB-CGSLB	0	1	1
Employers’ organisations	1	2	3
Public Services	2	4	6
Total	6	14	20

2. Texts of Intersectoral agreements

	Intersec toral agreem ent (IPA-AIP)	Signature date	Location
1	1987-1988	7/11/1986	text is included in the appendix in Blaise (1986)
2	1989-1990	18/11/1988	text is included in the appendix in Blaise (1988)
3	1991-1992	27/11/1990	text is included in the appendix in Blaise (1990)
4	1993-1994	09/12/1992	http://www.nar.be/Interpr-akkoord.htm
5	1995-1996	07/12/1994	http://www.nar.be/Interpr-akkoord.htm
	1997-1998	No agreement	http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi_loi/change_lg.pl?language=nl&la=N&table_name=wet&cn=1997012734
6	1999-2000	08/12/1998	http://www.nar.be/Interpr-akkoord.htm
7	2001-2002	22/12/2000	http://www.nar.be/Interpr-akkoord.htm
8	2003-2004	17/01/2003	http://www.nar.be/Interpr-akkoord.htm
9	2005-2006	draft	http://users.skynet.be/syndicaalnieuws/interprofessioneel05/ontwerp%20IPA%2004-05.htm
10	2007-2008	02/02/2007	http://www.nar.be/Interpr-akkoord.htm
11	2009-2010	22/12/2008	http://www.nar.be/Interpr-akkoord.htm
12	2011-2012	draft	http://www.dewereldmorgen.be/docs/2011/01/19/ontwerpipa2011-2012.pdf with government implementation: https://easyweb.easypay-group.com/uploads/publication/303_Het_Interprofessioneel_Akkoord_2011_NL_versie_1072011.pdf
	2013-2014	No agreement	Partial 'agreements': https://www.acv-online.be/Images/130329-Sociale-partners-sloten-totaalakkoord-in-NAR_tcm183-297959.pdf
13	2015-2016	draft	http://www.socialedialoog.be/images/Groep%20van%2010%2030%2001%202015%2013u00.pdf
14	2017-2018	02/02/2017	http://www.nar.be/Interpr-akkoord.htm

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