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“Women Teachers’ Lobby”: Justice, Gender, and Politics in the Equal Pay Fight of the New York City Interborough Association of Women Teachers, 1906–1911

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Abstract

This paper explores the movement of the New York City Interborough Association of Women Teachers (IAWT) for “equal pay for equal work” in teaching salaries, which it won in 1911. The IAWT’s success sheds light on the possibilities and limits of women teachers advocating for change within a feminized profession. Leading the movement were of a group of women teachers, organizing before woman’s suffrage and in an era of sex-differentiated work and pay, who convinced the city’s public and state’s legislators that they deserved pay equal to what men teachers received. They did so by strategic maneuvering in city and state politics and making equal pay look reasonable. And they did so by narrowly defining their goals and leaning on their identities as women to push a theoretically sex-neutral claim of justice. Their success, though limited, was nonetheless a victory in shifting ideas about women’s societal and professional status in New York City and the state.

Keywords: equal pay; women teachers; professional status; New York

“Knowledge should have no sex; Justice no gender; nor should we belie the fundamental truths of the Nation by denying equality before the law.”¹ So declared New York State attorney general Thomas Carmody at a banquet held by the Interborough Association of Women Teachers (IAWT) in April of 1911. Carmody was speaking in support of “equal pay for equal work,” the sole goal and platform of the IAWT. Founded in 1906 by a number of New York City’s women teachers who were frustrated by inequalities between their pay and the pay of men teachers, the IAWT worked for five years to equalize teacher salaries in the city. In October of 1911, they succeeded. That month, the New York State Legislature passed the Grady “Equal Pay” Bill. New York City mayor William J. Gaynor and New York governor John Alden Dix quickly signed the bill into law.

¹“Equal Pay Whooped Up at Teachers Banquet,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 30, 1911, 24.

The 1911 Grady “Equal Pay” Law set teacher salaries based on years and grade taught, and explicitly ended sex discrimination for those salaries in New York City.²

The IAWT’s success sheds light on the possibilities, and limits, of women teachers advocating for change from their position as women within a feminized profession. The equal pay movement was led by a group of women teachers, before woman’s suffrage and in an era of sex-differentiated work and pay, who convinced the city’s populace and the state’s legislators that they deserved “equal pay for equal work.” They did so by strategic maneuvering in city and state politics and making equal pay look reasonable. And they did so by narrowly defining their goals and leaning on their identity as women in a female-dominated profession to push a theoretically sex-neutral claim of justice. Their success, though limited, was a victory in shifting ideas about women’s societal and professional status in New York.

Why Revisit the Equal Pay Movement

A new exploration of the IAWT’s process and successes in winning the 1911 Equal Pay Law sheds fresh light on the complicated ideas women teachers negotiated about sex, gender, labor, and equality in the first decade of the twentieth century. A few scholars have explicitly discussed the New York City women teachers’ equal pay movement. Patricia Carter has argued the movement demonstrates the role of teachers in the women’s movement, while Robert Doherty suggests it was an intriguing episode perhaps representative of polarized politics in New York at the time.³ Other scholars, writing broadly about teachers in the Progressive Era, have identified some possibilities but many limits to women teachers’ power in the era.⁴ Diana D’Amico Pawlewicz, for example, argues that Progressive Era school reformers created bureaucratized structures in the name of teachers and professionalism that worked to limit the power of teachers within school systems.⁵

Addressing these various contexts of the equal pay movement while taking the rhetoric and actions of the women teachers themselves seriously in all their complexity,

²By-Laws of the Board of Education of the City of New York (New York: Borough of Manhattan, 1914), 165–66; “Women’s Equal-Pay Bill before the Assembly,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Oct. 5, 1911, 3; “Miss Strachan Is Back; Equal Pay Bill Passed,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Oct. 6, 1911, 26; *Teachers’ New “Equal Pay” Salary Schedules: As Adopted by the Board of Education, November 29, 1911* (New York: The New York Globe, 1911), 3–4.

³Patricia Carter, “Becoming the ‘New Women’: The Equal Rights Campaigns of New York City Schoolteachers, 1900–1920,” in *The Teacher’s Voice: A Social History of Teaching in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Richard J. Altenbaugh (Washington, DC: Falmer Press, 1992), 40–58; Patricia Anne Carter, *Everybody’s Paid but the Teacher: The Teaching Profession and the Women’s Movement* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); Robert Doherty, “Tempest on the Hudson: The Struggle for ‘Equal Pay for Equal Work’ in the New York City Public Schools, 1907–1911,” *History of Education Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1979), 413–34.

⁴Jackie Blount, *Destined to Rule the Schools: Women and the Superintendency, 1873–1995* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998); Kate Rousmaniere, *Citizen Teacher: The Life and Leadership of Margaret Haley* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005); Diana D’Amico, “Uneasy Union: Women Teachers, Organized Labor, and the Contested Ideology of the Profession during the Progressive Era,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 14 no. 3 (2017), 35–54; Diana D’Amico Pawlewicz, *Blaming Teachers: Professionalization Policies and the Failure of Reform in American History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

⁵D’Amico Pawlewicz, *Blaming Teachers*, 43–71.

I argue, gives us a more robust understanding of the significance of the IAWT. It shows us how the women of the IAWT understood the bounds of their own activism and demands. It reminds us that they were successful in winning equal pay, despite general trends against teacher power in the era. It clarifies why they succeeded and how their success was limited. And it highlights how the rhetoric of and advocacy for equal pay both challenged and solidified ideas about sex difference and the role of men and women in society at the time.

The women of the IAWT made progress on an aspect of sex equality—equal pay—while simultaneously depending on ideas about the essential nature of womanhood. They could do so because, somewhat uniquely for women workers at the time, they occupied a job that was deemed appropriate for women but was also performed by men.⁶ Even before 1900, women teachers made up the vast majority of New York City's public school teachers, constituting more than half of secondary teachers and almost all primary teachers, boys' and girls' classes alike. The classroom had become an extension of the home sphere, an "overflowing from the domestic circle" in scholar Geraldine Clifford's words.⁷ As metaphorical mothers of the city's schoolchildren—New York City, like most places, banned women teachers from marriage during this period—women teachers could claim public space as a realm appropriate to the roles and functions of motherhood, as did many political women at the time.⁸

Although women held the majority of teaching positions, however, there were still men teachers. And men and women teachers went through the same training and earned the same certifications to be allowed into the city's classrooms. Some of New York City's women teachers, therefore, could genuinely claim they were doing equal work for unequal pay. Of course, there were limits to this notion of equality. Though a few IAWT proposals did suggest banning salary differentiation on the grounds of "color" and "race," the movement was one of White women for White women, and the eventual equal pay law only ended salary discrimination on the basis of sex.⁹ Even for White women teachers it was only those at the secondary level, and perhaps only those teaching boys' classes at the secondary level, who could truly claim they were

⁶See Redding Sugg, *Motherteacher: The Feminization of American Education* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978); Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History*, 75, no. 1 (June 1988), 9–39; Nancy Hoffman, ed., *Woman's "True" Profession: Voices from the History of Teaching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2003); Geraldine Clifford, *Those Good Gertrudes: A Social History of Women Teachers in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); D'Amico Pawlewicz, *Blaming Teachers*.

⁷Clifford, *Those Good Gertrudes*, xi.

⁸Scholars have written extensively on the role and rhetoric of maternalism in women's politics and political organizing before suffrage. Despite their formal political disenfranchisement, women could enter the "public sphere" or political world through their roles as mothers and protectors of children. See Nancy S. Dye, introduction to *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era*, ed. Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 1–9; Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Anne Boylan, "Claiming Visibility: Women in Public / Public Women in the United States, 1865–1910," in *Becoming Visible: Women's Presence in Late Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Janet Floyd et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 17–40.

⁹Grace Charlotte Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work: The Story of the Struggle for Justice Being Made by the Women Teachers of the City of New York* (New York: B.F. Buck & Co., 1910), 118, 205.

doing equal work to a comparative male teacher in the same position. In fact, there were sometimes complaints from women primary teachers that they were not included in the equal pay movement.¹⁰ Grace Strachan, president of the IAWT, and the rest of the IAWT leadership rarely paid heed to these objections, however, suggesting they were political attacks, and some primary teachers certainly did join the IAWT.¹¹ The association claimed to speak for all of the city's women teachers.

The popularity of, or at least public attention to, the equal pay movement speaks to the centrality of debates about teaching and education in the city at the time. The equal pay movement, from the early days through the passage of equal pay, was heavily covered by both the Brooklyn-based *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and Manhattan's *New York Times*, albeit generally from different political perspectives. This is useful to a historian, because neither IAWT documents nor Strachan's papers were preserved, except for a 1910 book published by Strachan documenting the work of the IAWT and the equal pay movement, and most of the legislative documents on the topic burned in a fire in the state capitol in 1911.¹² The heavy newspaper coverage also speaks to realities of city, teacher, and gender politics in New York City in those years. The push for equal pay for New York City's women teachers came in part out of Brooklyn women teachers' grievances about the politics surrounding the consolidation of the city's various boroughs and municipalities into what became present-day New York City in 1898, grievances the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* leadership shared. And the attention paid by the *New York Times* suggests an interest in and focus on the movement far beyond that borough.

Salary Chaos and Precedents in Consolidation

The political training for many of the women teachers involved in the equal pay struggle and the political precedents for their campaign came from fights over schools and pay during the consolidation period in New York City. In 1898, the various boroughs and principalities of the greater New York area—which previously existed as their own municipalities with their own governments, mayors, politics, and school systems—were consolidated into one New York City.¹³ One of the largest challenges in unifying the municipalities was in deciding how to consolidate their school systems. Each school system was “dear to the people of the locality,” the New York (Manhattan) Mayor's Committee report on the draft charter noted.¹⁴ In Manhattan and Brooklyn, especially, the character and identity of the cities were deeply entwined with their schools. These two school systems were also different in many ways, including in policies

¹⁰“Their Bill Passed, Teachers Still Row,” *New York Times*, April 28, 1907, 7.

¹¹Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 158–59.

¹²There are limitations to relying heavily on newspapers as an archival source. In this case, however, the existence of significant newspaper coverage allows us to tell a story and hear voices that would otherwise be nearly impossible to recreate. For more on newspapers as a historical source, see Stephen Vella, “Chapter 11: Newspapers,” in *Reading Primary Sources*, ed. Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann (New York: Routledge, 2009), 192–208.

¹³Prior to consolidation, “New York City” referred only to Manhattan and the Bronx.

¹⁴“Greater City's Charter,” *New York Times*, Jan. 1, 1897, 1.

and structures, curriculum, methods of hiring, and pay scales.¹⁵ The compromise on schools in the consolidation charter was to balance a centralized school system with a decentralized one. The old city boards of education became the new borough school boards under one central Board of Education. Each local school board held the right to set its own salaries.¹⁶

Almost immediately after consolidation, this new system caused problems with pay. In the old Brooklyn system teachers had been paid on the first of the month, and so expected their first paycheck of 1898 on February 1. In late January they were informed they would be paid on February 15, the traditional payday in the old Manhattan system, but by late February they had still not been paid, and were told they would be paid for January by March 1. For teachers who had expected their pay a full month previously, and had bills to pay, there was understandable frustration. Queens and Richmond had similar salary complications.¹⁷ Another issue with pay was the inequality between the systems. Before consolidation, Brooklyn and Manhattan had different pay schedules, with Manhattan teachers earning more money. The city charter allowed these gaps to stand, causing Brooklyn teachers to chafe under the inequality. While some teachers turned to the Brooklyn school board for redress, others turned to the state legislature with the understanding that the whole issue had started there with the adoption of the city charter, and that the Brooklyn school board had little power over funding. By March, multiple state senators—including Senator John Ahearn of Manhattan who had a long-standing interest in education—had submitted bills to set a minimum salary for all boroughs and all teachers, raising Brooklyn salaries and settling the pay system.¹⁸

In 1899 the Ahearn Bill was signed into law. The law retained the power of setting salaries with the school boards but set a minimum salary for various positions and years of service.¹⁹ The Ahearn Law, intended to stabilize the salary system, actually initiated another round of chaos, with continued confusion over where the money was coming from, how the money was to be dispersed, and legal challenges over how salaries were to be set. Consequently, the first payday of the 1899-1900 school year again passed without teachers being paid and with matters remaining unsettled of exactly how much, and when, they would be paid.²⁰ In the year and a half after consolidation, as many as thirty-seven different salary schedules had been considered by the Board of

¹⁵ A. Emerson Palmer, *The New York Public School: Being a History of Free Education in the City of New York* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905); David C. Hammack, *Power and Society: Greater New York at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1982).

¹⁶ Mark Ash, *The Greater New York Charter, as Enacted in 1897, with Notes* (Albany: Weed-Parsons Printing, 1897), 528–61.

¹⁷ “Teachers Are Worried,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Jan. 23, 1898, 26; “To Pay Teachers March 1,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Feb. 25, 1898, 13; “News of Queens Borough,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Feb. 24, 1898, 5; “Wants the Teachers Paid,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Feb. 28, 1898, 16; “Teachers’ Pay Next Week,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 10, 1898, 2.

¹⁸ “Teachers Show Temper,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 4, 1898, 7; “Senator Ahearn’s Salary Bill,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 9, 1898, 6; Palmer, *The New York Public School*, 281.

¹⁹ “The Ahearn Bill,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 22, 1898, 13; “Mayor Van Wyck Signs Ahearn Teachers Bill,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 22, 1899, 2.

²⁰ “Teachers Won’t Accept Whalen’s Compromise,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Oct. 29, 1899, 42; Palmer, *The New York Public School*, 281–82.

Education. Teachers found this an unacceptable situation; they wanted pay stability and security.²¹

Thus, 1900 opened with another round of legislative struggles in January. A group of teachers and legislators met with the governor to discuss the problems with the Ahearn Law, and the governor recommended introducing yet another bill. By March, teachers and legislators had coalesced around a bill introduced by George Allen Davis—a senator from Erie County who sat on the Cities Committee of the Senate—which would mandate all teaching salaries across the city.²² While the city Board of Education and borough school boards were against the imposition of the state mandate of the Davis Bill, most teachers supported the law, choosing to prioritize stability in their pay over their prior allegiance to their local school boards. “It was not now a question of centralization or decentralization with the Brooklyn teachers, but a question of getting their salaries,” the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported.²³

The Davis Bill succeeded in large part because of the chaos it was ending. The people wanted their teachers paid and their schools stabilized: supporting the Davis Bill was the answer. Throughout 1898–1900, teachers and their allies had made salaries a major political issue. They met with senators, assemblymen, and the governor, attended hearings with the mayor and in the legislature by the hundreds, and wrote petitions that they and members of the public signed.²⁴ Both men and women teachers organized, petitioned, testified in hearings, and went to Albany. In fact, the salary issue seems to have been a specific factor in bringing women teachers into legislative politics. Hundreds of women attended the mayor’s hearings for pay bills. After a 1899 hearing on the Ahearn Bill, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* noted there had not been so many women in the mayor’s office since the hearing for the same bill the previous year.²⁵ Involvement in Albany was so high that in January 1900 the chair of the Cities Committee in the Senate asked senators to tell their constituents “not to send car loads of interested men and women to argue on the bill [emphasis added]” but rather a few people to streamline the process.²⁶ The push for pay stability was a movement that involved the entire teaching staff of New York City—men and women—and they became, to the disgust of the city controller, “a political force which it is dangerous to oppose, no matter how extravagant their demands may be.”²⁷ The teachers’ political strength came from their ability to influence the legislature and the public. Although few teachers were men and

²¹“Miss Granger’s Speech,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 22, 1899, 6.

²²“School Teachers See the Governor,” *New York Times*, Jan. 31, 1900, 8; “Hearing on School Bills,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Jan. 24, 1900, 13; “Coler’s Emergency Bill Advanced in Committee,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Jan. 16, 1900, 2; “Teachers’ Pay Conference,” *New York Times*, Jan. 21, 1900, 9.

²³“Teachers Like Davis Bill,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 10, 1900, 17.

²⁴“The Ahearn Bill”; “Better Pay for Teachers,” *New York Times*, April 2, 1898, 14; “Mayor Van Wyck Signs Ahearn Teachers Bill”; “Teachers Show Temper”; “A Thousand Teachers at Davis Bill Hearing,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 28, 1900, 15; “Teachers’ Pay Conference”; “Teachers Issue Appeal in Support of Davis Law,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Feb. 4, 1901, 5; “School Teachers See the Governor,” *New York Times*, Jan. 31, 1900, 8; “School Board to Protest,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 6, 1898, 10.

²⁵“Mayor Van Wyck Signs Ahearn Teachers Bill”; “Miss Granger’s Speech.”

²⁶“Coler’s Emergency Bill Advanced in Committee.”

²⁷“Davis School Bill Signed,” *New York Times*, May 4, 1900, 3.

Table 1. Davis Salary Schedule

Years of Service	Women Teachers—Primary	Men Teachers—Primary	Women Teachers—Secondary	Men Teachers—Secondary
1	\$600	\$900	\$1,100	\$1,300
3	\$696	\$1,110	\$1,260	\$1,520
5	\$792	\$1,320	\$1,420	\$1,740
7	\$888	\$1,530	\$1,580	\$1,960
9	\$984	\$1,740	\$1,740	\$2,180
11	\$1,080	\$1,950	\$1,900	\$2,400
Maximum	\$1,320 (at 16 years)	\$2,160 (at 13 years)	\$1,900 (at 11 years)	\$2,400 (at 11 years)
Yearly Increase	\$48	\$105	\$80	\$110

Source: Teachers' New "Equal Pay" Salary Schedules: As Adopted by the Board of Education, November 29, 1911, 5-7.

therefore voters, they acted as a political lobbying group and were able to mobilize significant political support.

The May 1900 signing of the Davis Bill into law concluded a period of chaos in the schools. Not everyone, not even all teachers, supported it, but everyone agreed that it calmed the turmoil that had marked the previous two years. The Davis Law stabilized salaries in the new consolidated system for the first time. It raised salaries and mandated them. No longer could school boards or the Board of Education change salaries on a whim, nor could the Board of Estimate refuse to provide the funds to pay the salaries. The Davis Law also, however, legislated inequality in one key respect: it apportioned higher pay for men teachers than women at every level of school and year of experience (see [table 1](#)).

Support in the Fight for Equal Pay

The lessons from consolidation came in handy a few years later when some women teachers in New York City began to object to the sex-based inequality in pay formalized in the Davis Law.²⁸ In 1900, few women teachers publicly objected to sex differences in the Davis Law pay schedule. Within a few years, however, some had begun to speak out against the inequalities in the law.²⁹ In the spring of 1905, a group of Brooklyn women in the citywide Class Teachers' Association brought up the issue of equal pay, both within the organization and through a circular they sent to women teachers in the district.

²⁸Scholars who do not fully contextualize the precedents of the consolidation period have difficulty explaining the women teachers' turn to the legislature. See Doherty, "Tempest on the Hudson."

²⁹"Women Teachers Angry," *New York Times*, Oct. 11, 1905, 11; Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 11; "Schoolma'ams Want Men Teachers' Pay," *New York Times*, April 30, 1905, 8.

That the protest had deep origins in Brooklyn was no accident; before consolidation in 1898, the city of Brooklyn paid men and women teachers equally.³⁰ Many of Brooklyn's women teachers remembered a time of equal pay with men teachers before consolidation and the Davis Law, and thus were very resentful of unequal pay. They argued that the Davis Law benefited men teachers more than women teachers, and, now that the system and pay were more stable, it was their turn. They found, however, that the men teachers in the organization and the male president specifically were unwilling to help them. In 1906, the women teachers' movement for equal pay began in earnest. Several hundred women split from the Class Teachers' Organization to form their own group, the Women Teachers' Organization. This group, soon to be renamed the IAWT, was founded on the explicit principle of equal pay for equal work.³¹

In April 1906, the IAWT petitioned the New York City Board of Education to equalize salaries. The board turned down the IAWT's petition with minimal consideration, and few board members were present for a requested hearing on the question of pay. By the end of 1906 the IAWT claimed four thousand members across the city and was rapidly expanding.³² Rebuffed by the Board of Education, IAWT members began to speak with state legislators about the possibilities of introducing a bill to equalize salaries.³³ As the *New York Times* noted, given the circumstances, the women would "undoubtedly appeal to the Legislature in its next session for redress."³⁴ It was possibly a sarcastic comment about the persistence of the women teachers, as the paper's editors did not support the push for equal pay. However, the comment also reflected the state of affairs of education politics in New York City. The precedent had been set with consolidation: when New York City teachers did not get what they wanted from the Board of Education, they went to the legislature.

In turning to the legislature, the women of the IAWT knew they needed to gain public and political support. A central figure in this effort was the IAWT's politically savvy president, Grace Strachan. A veteran of the 1898-1900 salary stabilization movement and a district superintendent in New York City, Strachan was the figurehead, spokesperson, and leader of the IAWT. IAWT members "have laughed when she

³⁰Brooklyn appears to have equalized teaching salaries in 1870. Why and how this happened deserves more research. See "Teachers' Salaries," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 16, 1870, 2.

³¹"Women Teachers Angry"; "Schoolma'ams Want Men Teachers' Pay"; "City's Women Teachers Demand the Pay of Men," *New York Times*, April 8, 1906, 22.

³²It is unclear exactly how large the IAWT was. By 1908, IAWT members and allies regularly claimed a membership of twelve thousand, just shy of the entire number of women teachers in the public schools. This was almost certainly an exaggeration, as presumably not every woman teacher was a member. Many hundreds of women teachers appeared at meetings and hearings, and at least fifteen hundred attended a 1910 IAWT banquet. With the exception of some primary teachers, there is limited evidence of women teachers at any grade level speaking against equal pay or the IAWT. Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 32, 214–15, 228, 233, 450; "Women Are Confident They'll Get Equal Pay," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Dec. 5, 1909, 9; "Women Teachers at Albany," *New York Times*, Feb. 27, 1907, 14; "Women Teachers Meet: A Wake for Salary Bill," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 1, 1907, 2; "1,945 at a Dinner Cheer Equal Pay," *New York Times*, April 17, 1910, 12.

³³"City's Women Teachers Demand the Pay of Men"; "Board Rules against the Women Teachers," *New York Times*, May 10, 1906, 9; Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 30–31; "Teachers Will Tackle Albany for Higher Pay," *New York Times*, Dec. 16, 1906, 4.

³⁴"Women Teachers Want Equal Pay with Men," *New York Times*, Sept. 30, 1906, 9.

laughed, looked serious when she was sad, and raged as one woman when she was angry,” the *New York Times* reported in 1910.³⁵ Through charisma or brute force of will, Strachan aligned the thousands of IAWT’s members around the common goal of equal pay for the four years of her leadership. Strachan was also immensely strategic and knew how to build coalitions and gain the support of politicians. While it is unclear exactly how she made the connections, she personally knew almost all the key political figures in Albany. In February 1907, a month and a half into the legislative campaign for equal pay, she reported to the IAWT that she had seen the governor, lieutenant governor, speaker of the house, senators, assemblymen, and other government officials. She had discussed equal pay with each of them.³⁶

Alongside their legislative activism, IAWT women worked to raise awareness and support for their campaign and convince the community, and especially voting men, to support them. In an open letter to clergymen, for example, the IAWT asked faith leaders to bring the IAWT’s appeal to their congregations, highlighting their work as teachers for the city and suggesting their request was a matter of simple fairness. “We are serving the city faithfully to the best of our ability and strength. *All we ask of the city in return is Justice—the justice of Equal Pay for Equal Work* [emphasis in original],” they wrote.³⁷ In at least one case the plea was successful. On a May morning in 1907 the minister of a United Congregational church in Brooklyn spent half his sermon reminding his congregants that women teachers were worthy and deserved justice, much to the surprise and pleasure of the women teachers present. Tellingly, the minister used the terminology of justice, as requested by the IAWT. He also informed his congregants that he would not explain what the “White Bill”—the equal pay bill then up for debate—was, only why they should support it, because he assumed they already knew about it.³⁸ By May 1907, the minister believed it was safe to assume that an average New Yorker, or at least member of his church, knew the basics of the equal pay fight.

Word of mouth was a major form of communication for the IAWT women. As teachers, they were central members of their communities, with connections high and low. They implemented a “club to club” canvass among civic, labor, taxpayer, and women’s organizations, gaining the support of over 350 clubs representing hundreds of thousands of voters. They went door-to-door getting thousands of signatures on petitions, and even had their students bring home petitions to be signed (much to the displeasure of the Board of Education).³⁹ They used connections they had through family, students, or the organizations that had endorsed them, getting letters of support from leading citizens. “If we needed them, we could get a hundred of the most prominent men in the city to go to Albany to talk for us; but their presence is not necessary. We have their support, and they have signed our petitions,” an IAWT member

³⁵“Lose Miss Strachan? Teachers Aghast,” *New York Times*, Oct. 2, 1910, 9.

³⁶“Women Certain to Win Increase of Salaries,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Feb. 22, 1907, 6.

³⁷Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 512.

³⁸“Dr. Dyott Favors Teachers,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 20, 1907, 7.

³⁹“Methods of ‘Equal Pay’ Advocates,” *New York Times*, May 23, 1907, 8; “Central Labor Union to Organize Teachers,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 3, 1907, 1; “School Children Circulating Petitions in Its Favor,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1907, 6; Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 205, 545–47.

reported.⁴⁰ Necessary or not, they did use petitions and the actual presence of those prominent men. The support was clear in public meetings, where influential politicians and businessmen spoke on their behalf, and in the connections through which the IAWT women had allies speak to legislators for them.⁴¹

The IAWT did not confine its campaigning to New York City but also brought significant political pressure to bear in Albany. IAWT members ensured there would be hundreds of women teachers at each Senate and Assembly hearing. They testified in hearings, supported speakers, and spoke to individual legislators. More than five hundred women teachers came to Albany in February 1907 for one hearing, spending extra time speaking to legislators. "Everywhere I looked a group of women had some poor devil of a Senator or Assemblyman in a corner, and they didn't let him go until he promised to support the bill," complained one male teacher there in opposition of the bill.⁴² The IAWT women, by the hundreds, talked to legislators about equal pay, inside and outside of committee. They were a major presence anytime equal pay was up for discussion, and even when it was not. "Influence of all sorts, except bribery, was brought to bear on the legislators," the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* summarized in July of 1907. "Day and night the lawmakers had no peace, and on Sundays at their homes they received visits from friends of the teachers."⁴³ The IAWT women proved such a powerful lobby in Albany that the Board of Education, against equal pay, continually changed absence policies to try and limit their lobbying abilities.⁴⁴ These strategies largely failed to stymie the IAWT women, who continued to attend hearings in large numbers and sent allies when they could not appear themselves.

Making equal pay a political litmus test, IAWT members worked to support legislators and politicians who supported equal pay, despite the members not having the right to vote themselves. "There are 12,000 [women teachers], and they have friends, and if a man opposed to this bill has political ambitions he might as well bury them," Commissioner Abram Stern of the Board of Education worried in May 1907.⁴⁵ Indeed, the IAWT demonstrated its political power when the first equal pay bill—the White Bill of 1907, named for Senator Horace White, a staunch supporter—came to a vote that same month. With the pressure of the "women teachers' lobby," as the IAWT members were known in Albany, the White Bill passed with stunning majorities: by a vote of 45-1 in the Senate and 105-15 in the Assembly.⁴⁶

In the end, this show of political support was not enough to gain equal pay in 1907 because of two individual men and the realities of the New York political system. At the

⁴⁰"Assembly Committee to Hear Women Teachers," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 1, 1907, 18.

⁴¹"Teachers Wake Equal Pay Bill," *New York Times*, June 23, 1907, C4; "Assembly Committee to Hear Women Teachers"; Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 406; "Executive Committee of Women Teachers Association Has Decided Not to Join the Central Labor Unions of New York," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 22, 1907, 15.

⁴²"Women Teachers at Albany."

⁴³"Executive Committee of Women Teachers Association Has Decided Not to Join the Central Labor Unions of New York."

⁴⁴Doherty, "Tempest on the Hudson," 423.

⁴⁵"Teachers Heard by Gov. Hughes," *New York Times*, May 25, 1907, 2.

⁴⁶"Executive Committee of Women Teachers Association"; "Teachers' Bill Repasses," *New York Times*, May 16, 1907, 1; "Women Teachers Meet; a Wake for Salary Bill"; Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 32.

time, New York State law allowed city mayors, alongside the governor, veto power over bills relating to their city's financial matters. In 1907, New York City mayor George B. McClellan Jr. vetoed the White Bill on the grounds of home rule and cost. When the legislature overrode his veto, the White Bill was then sent to New York governor Charles Evans Hughes, who also vetoed the White Bill.⁴⁷ Hughes's veto apparently came to the surprise of both supporters and opponents of equal pay, all of whom expected him to sign the bill.⁴⁸ Ultimately, his veto came too late in the legislative session to be overridden. Therefore, the mayor and the governor stopped equal pay from becoming law in 1907. The women of the IAWT had demonstrated significant political and public support for equal pay, however, and continued to do so in the succeeding years. In many ways, they simply had to wait for the right political conditions—a new mayor and governor, which they would get in 1911—to reach their goal.

As the IAWT sustained its push for equal pay in the years following the vetoes of 1907, it continued to build relationships, demonstrate support for the cause, and agitate in New York City and in Albany. In 1908, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* noted that the leadership of the IAWT was so well connected that it was just as well informed as the newspaper correspondents as to what was happening in Albany.⁴⁹ That same year, Strachan reminded IAWT members at a mass meeting that they should make sure their voices were heard in the upcoming elections. They were to lobby their fathers, brothers, and friends to vote for equal pay candidates. It was a bipartisan effort. The Republican women would support the Republican candidates who had been friends of the women teachers, and the Democratic women would support the Democratic candidates who had been their friends.⁵⁰ One woman at the meeting told a story of a would-be politician in Brooklyn who had decided not to run for office after he was told he would have to campaign against equal pay. "Not on your life," he apparently said. "The women have shown themselves too good politicians."⁵¹ The IAWT women also continued to demonstrate significant political and public support through mass meetings and dinners. These included a December 1909 mass meeting where they filled Carnegie Hall, and a dinner in April 1910 attended by two thousand people including a senator, the secretary of state, three assemblymen, a congressman, the fire commissioner, and a borough president.⁵²

From 1908 through 1911, legislative success on equal pay remained elusive, despite the significant political and public support the IAWT and the equal pay cause

⁴⁷"Executive Committee of Women Teachers Association"; "Teachers' Bill Repasses"; "Women Teachers Meet; a Wake for Salary Bill"; Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 32; "Hughes Vetoes Teachers' Bill," *New York Times*, May 30, 1907, 2.

⁴⁸"Hughes Vetoes Teachers' Bill." It is unclear exactly why Hughes vetoed the bill. In his veto message he wrote that he supported the idea of equal pay in principle but preferred to equalize pay for all civil servants and the entire state. He did not seem to show much additional commitment to equal pay, however, making it likely he simply did not want to appear to be standing against a popular bill.

⁴⁹"Women Teachers' Bill in Committee on Rules," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 5, 1908, 8.

⁵⁰"Interborough Teachers Active in Politics," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Oct. 4, 1908, 5; "Women Teachers Favor Repeal of Davis Law," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Dec. 6, 1908, 36.

⁵¹"Interborough Teachers Active in Politics."

⁵²"All Teachers Laughed at the Mayor's Letter," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Dec. 18, 1909, 3; "1,945 at a Dinner Cheer Equal Pay."

continued to enjoy. In 1908, a proposed equal pay bill got stuck in committee in the Assembly, blocked by Hughes's allies, who did not want the governor to have to veto the bill a second time. The IAWT women could not get it out of committee despite the help from friendly politicians and allies, including a petition signed by 104 of the 150 Assembly members asking for the bill's release.⁵³ In 1909, a Charter Revision Commission was formed in the legislature. Since the Davis Law was part of the city charter and the IAWT believed the charter revision would include an equal pay clause, it did not push for a separate equal pay bill. By the time the charter revision failed, there was not enough time to get an independent equal pay bill through the legislature and around vetoes.⁵⁴ In 1910 there was a newly elected Board of Estimate in New York City, so the IAWT women turned to it rather than to the legislature for relief. While the board did report in favor of equalizing salaries, the new salary schedule ran up against the unequal mandate of the Davis Law.⁵⁵ Therefore, the IAWT women turned to the legislature again in 1911. That year the legislature formed another charter commission. By April the IAWT, aware that the newly elected mayor and governor were both on the side of equal pay and that equal pay was included in the new charter, had begun celebrating the upcoming victory.

However, there was one last surprise, in October 1911, when it appeared that the new charter for the City of New York would die in the legislature. The IAWT leadership leapt into action. President Strachan and other IAWT members met with Governor Dix in Albany, and they jointly decided equal pay should become a stand-alone bill that would be pushed through without the charter. Within days, the IAWT women had gained support from Mayor Gaynor for a separate equal pay bill, and Governor Dix sent an emergency message to the legislature requesting its rapid passage. Three days after IAWT executives met with Governor Dix, the Grady "Equal Pay" Bill—named for long-serving New York City senator and IAWT supporter Thomas Grady—passed the legislature by significant margins.⁵⁶ By the end of October the bill had been signed by the mayor and the governor. On January 1, 1912, the Grady "Equal Pay" Law went into effect, setting salaries for New York City's teachers without any differentiation on the sex of the teacher (see [table 2](#)).

⁵³"Equal Pay Indorsed [*sic*] after Joint Debate," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 14, 1908, 13; "Women Challenge School Men to Debate," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 11, 1908, 11; "Graham Ave. Trade Board," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 22, 1908, 49; "Teachers Applaud Political Equality," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 7, 1908, 3; Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 32, 213-16; "Women Teachers State Their Case Clearly," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 10, 1909, 25; "Central Labor Union Indorses Teachers Bill," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 9, 1908, 12.

⁵⁴"Women Teachers State Their Case Clearly"; "'Twas Tuttle Urged Strike of Teachers," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 11, 1909, 1; Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 32, 213-16, 237.

⁵⁵"Women Teachers Have No Favorite Candidate," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Feb. 6, 1910, 8; "Teachers Win Part of Equal Pay Fight," *New York Times*, Oct. 29, 1910, 1; "A Woman's Pay," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Oct. 22, 1911, 26.

⁵⁶*By-Laws of the Board of Education of the City of New York*, 165-66; "Women's Equal-Pay Bill before the Assembly"; "Miss Strachan Is Back; Equal Pay Bill Passed"; "Passes Equal Pay Bill," *New York Times*, Oct. 6, 1911, 4; *Teachers' New "Equal Pay" Salary Schedules: As Adopted by the Board of Education, November 29, 1911*, 3-4.

Table 2. Grady “Equal Pay” Salary Schedule

Years of Service	Primary Teachers	Secondary Teachers
1	\$720	\$900
2	\$720	\$1,000
3	\$720	\$1,100
4	\$780	\$1,300
6	\$900	\$1,600
8	\$1,020	\$1,900
10	\$1,140	\$2,200
12	\$1,260	\$2,500
Maximum	\$1,500 (at 16 years)	\$2,650 (at 13 years)
Yearly Increase	\$60 after third year	\$100 second and third years \$200 fourth year \$150 successive years

Source: *Teachers’ New “Equal Pay” Salary Schedules*, 10, 12.

Relying on Sex and Gender to Claim a Need for Justice

By 1911 the IAWT women had won equal pay and had gained compelling political and public support for their cause—support they had gained and maintained since 1907, when they came within a hair of winning equal pay. In doing so, they had a serious advantage over other women’s organizations at the time. As teachers they could largely, and successfully, avoid the discussion about women’s “proper” spheres and activities. By the early twentieth century, women had comprised the majority of teachers in New York City for almost half a century. Because teaching was an acceptable space for women, charges of improper women’s behavior could be undercut and even ridiculed. Teachers, as the symbolic mothers of millions of children, could justify being in the public and political spheres as a maternal and womanly presence, connecting with the state through their role in nurturing children.⁵⁷ The ability to agitate publicly but remain within the accepted behavioral roles for women because of their position as teachers freed the IAWT women to act politically. Safe in the knowledge that, even as women, they could push for change to their pay—and as they had done in the consolidation era, to little public consternation regarding their sex—they could move from defending their activism to defending their position. They could therefore argue that the question of equal pay for teachers was one of sex-neutral justice, not a radical change in ideas about women in society but a reasonable acknowledgment of the “fundamental truths of the nation,” in Attorney General Carmody’s words.⁵⁸

The IAWT women and their allies did sometimes defer to essentialist ideas about womanhood or lean on their sex in claiming their value as teachers, often with humor. “If a woman’s influence is detrimental to a boy’s full development, then a law should be enacted to do away with mothers, as they are notoriously open to criticism in this

⁵⁷Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*.
⁵⁸“Equal Pay Whooped Up at Teachers Banquet.”

respect,” suggested one woman teacher in a newspaper editorial in 1907.⁵⁹ Those worried about the feminization of their boys could observe the words of John Dewey, noted educational scholar, who asked, “Where are our effeminate boys, if you please? I wish ... that I could happen on some of these effeminate school boys. Somehow, I’ve never been able to discover them.”⁶⁰ Or those who believed men were superior teachers might read in the newspaper the sarcastic response of a teacher named Miss Powers: “In what respects, may I ask, are the men teachers in advance of their sisters in the profession? ... Mentally? If they are, they have concealed it most successfully.”⁶¹

The politicians and allies who supported the IAWT women echoed these quips. Justice William J. Gaynor, who would become New York City mayor and sign the eventual equal pay law, declared at a 1908 IAWT mass meeting that as a student he had learned more from his women teachers than his men teachers.⁶² Taking the point further, Senator Patrick H. McCarren dismissed male teachers entirely. “I graduated at a public school, and no man teacher could get me to do anything,” he said in a Senate speech in support of equal pay. “It was the female teachers who gave me what education I received.”⁶³ IAWT members liked to quote a 1907 Public Education Association report that noted: “That the work of the women teachers is equal, if not superior, to that of the men engaged in teaching in the public schools seems not to be seriously disputed anywhere.”⁶⁴ The general consensus, while disputed by some male teachers and officials, was that women were in fact good teachers for the children of New York City. New Yorkers simply were not worried about women teachers. Whether they believed women were morally fitted for nurturing the young, had fond memories of their own women teachers, or simply liked their own children’s teachers, there was minimal public complaint about the appropriateness of women in the classroom.⁶⁵

IAWT members solidified ideas of their teaching strengths by embracing the rhetoric of motherhood. When asked about the possibility of going on strike in 1909, the IAWT outright rejected the possibility on the grounds that it would mean not fulfilling their metaphorical role. “We are not [going on strike],” Strachan responded to a question in a mass meeting, “no matter how much we realize the injustice of our situation. We are all of us mothers. We couldn’t leave our children.”⁶⁶ The women teachers were not, of course, the students’ mothers in a literal sense. But Strachan’s use of the motherhood frame in rejecting the decision to strike reminded her audience of the special nature of the women teachers’ position. As “mothers” they were dedicated to their children, and their political work was not a contradiction to that position or identity. It also highlighted another key strategy of the IAWT members, which was to separate themselves from ideas, movements, or actions that could be considered controversial.

⁵⁹“Topics of the Times: Men and Women Teachers,” *New York Times*, March 1, 1907, 8.

⁶⁰Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 82.

⁶¹“Topics of the Times.”

⁶²“Teachers Applaud Political Equality.”

⁶³Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 345.

⁶⁴Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 51.

⁶⁵“1,954 at a Dinner Cheer Equal Pay”; Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 345, 376, 389, 396.

⁶⁶“Teachers Will Not Strike,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 10, 1909, 25.

Strachan and the IAWT distanced themselves not just from a teacher's strike but also from other organizations and rallying cries that were potentially divisive, drawing strong lines between their activism and other political agitation. Some IAWT members did have broader ambitions for women and women teachers than equal pay and did form connections with teacher unionism or other women's causes after 1911.⁶⁷ The IAWT, however, was not nor did it claim to be a teacher's union or women's rights group or take on a multitude of concerns; it was an organization of women teachers focused solely on equal pay for equal work. Along with refusing to go on strike—justified as for the sake of the children and against the advice of a lawyer who thought a strike might make Mayor George B. McClellan sign the equal pay bill—the women of the IAWT refused to publicly ally with other movements and distanced themselves from other causes.⁶⁸ Despite occasional speeches at IAWT meetings in support of woman's suffrage, for example, the IAWT was officially neutral on the question of suffrage. And while the IAWT moved to take up a collection for striking women shirtwaist factory workers in December 1909, Strachan and the organization rejected officially coming out in support of that strike.⁶⁹

The distancing from other women's movements was generally in the name of political expediency. On the matter of suffrage, for instance, the women of the IAWT knew that some of their strongest legislative supporters, including Senators White, McCarren, and Grady, were against woman's suffrage.⁷⁰ By distancing itself from supporting causes that might be deemed more radical—despite taking support from any who offered it—the IAWT could walk the line between change and continuity on societally fixed gender roles. The women of the IAWT could suggest they were not pushing for radical societal change in their move for equal pay while simultaneously advocating for new ideas about economic equality and the value of work.

This balancing act was particularly clear when it came to ideas, often implicit, about what was known as the “breadwinner wage.” On one hand, women teachers were pushing for changes in social views of the economic value of women's labor in relation to men's by demanding equal pay. On the other hand, they were doing so from the position of a job that all but guaranteed they would remain single while earning money. Their work might potentially take jobs from men, but would not upset the family-wage model founded on of the economic power of the husband.⁷¹ Some of the debate over

⁶⁷ In the years after the passage of equal pay, the IAWT and Strachan developed a somewhat contentious relationship with the new teachers' organizations and unions. See D'Amico, “Uneasy Union”; Christopher Phelps, “Why Did Teachers Organize? Feminism and Socialism in the Making of New York City Teacher Unionism,” *Modern American History* 4 (2021), 131–58; “Teachers against New Constitution,” *New York Times*, Oct 2, 1915.

⁶⁸ “Teachers Will Not Strike”; “’Twas Tuttle Urged Strike of Teachers.”

⁶⁹ “Lose Miss Strachan? Teachers Aghast”; “Women Are Confident They'll Get Equal Pay.”

⁷⁰ “Lose Miss Strachan? Teachers Aghast”; “The Womanly Woman Saved,” *New York Times*, April 27, 1905, 1.

⁷¹ For more on the breadwinner wage, see Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). For other working women's activism regarding equal pay, see Lara Vapnek, *Breadwinners: Working Women and Economic Independence* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

equal pay did nevertheless center on these questions of demand, dependents, and family responsibilities. "If [the equal pay] bill becomes law ... it will defer the increase in the men's pay," one male teacher declared to the Senate Cities Committee in opposition to equal pay.⁷² Others worried that equalizing salaries would limit the number of men who became teachers, suggesting the law of supply and demand supported paying men teachers more than women.⁷³

Men teachers who were against equal pay also argued that they were in greater need of economic resources to support their families. While not directly contradicting the idea of the breadwinner wage, IAWT women and their allies dismissed this argument as irrelevant. They pointed out that many women teachers were also supporting families, despite their being single. The IAWT conducted surveys of its members in 1908, 1909, and 1910, and each year reported that only about 1 percent of the women teachers surveyed said they were supporting only themselves and no dependents.⁷⁴ "Let it not be forgotten that 99 per cent of the women who work are doing so, because through inability, indifference, dissipation, illness, or death, some man—father or husband or brother—has made it necessary," Strachan noted.⁷⁵ IAWT women and their allies also pointed out that men did not get paid based on the number of dependents they had. One IAWT supporter even suggested that men teachers' salaries be modified to increase on the basis of family expansion, not years of experience, if number of dependents was truly the key criterion of teacher pay.⁷⁶

Even as they acknowledged, dismissed, and embraced various ideas about sex roles, teaching, pay, and the family wage, the women teachers of the IAWT were often keen to move beyond these debates to the more sex-neutral rhetoric of "justice." Women teachers have the same training and "do the same work, are exempt from no rules or duties, and most of them have fathers, mothers, sisters or brothers dependent on them," a 1905 circular from women teachers in the Class Teachers' Association argued. "Why, then, should women not receive the same salaries? Let us make a strong, united effort to bring about a consummation of what is so manifestly just."⁷⁷ Women teachers, in a position almost unique for women workers at the time, were working a job that was acceptable for women and were doing the exact same job as their male coworkers, at least at the secondary level. They had the same training, taught the same lessons, and performed the same duties. They were therefore able to point out clearly the inconsistencies in pay. To pay a man more than a woman for doing the exact same job—and one that was acceptable for a woman—meant the only difference was sex. This, the IAWT and its allies argued, was unreasonable and unjust.

Because of this powerful rhetoric of justice, the most common arguments that men teachers and officials expressed in opposition to equal pay were not explicitly about sex. While some men made arguments about demand and families, those against equal

⁷²Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 433.

⁷³"Discuss Equal Pay at the City Club," *New York Times*, Jan. 23, 1910, 6.

⁷⁴"Women Teachers State Their Case Clearly"; "All Teachers Laughed at the Mayor's Letter"; "Discuss Equal Pay at the City Club."

⁷⁵Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 35.

⁷⁶"Women Teachers State Their Case Clearly"; Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 422.

⁷⁷"Schoolma'ams Want Men Teachers' Pay."

pay more commonly claimed that an equal pay law would be a violation of “home rule”—city sovereignty—and would cost too much. With respect to home rule, a brief from the Board of Estimate in 1911, for example, asked Governor Dix to veto the equal pay bill then before him to “vindicate the principle that we believe is even more fundamental than the principle of pay for position, namely, the principle of home rule.”⁷⁸ The board was careful not to say that it was against “pay for position,” or equal pay, for women teachers or to suggest the demand for equal pay was not a solid principle. Rather, it suggested that the principle of home rule took precedence.

On some level, the women of the IAWT acknowledged this argument. Their retorts, however, pointed out the fallacies of “home rule” to begin with, often bringing in powerful male allies to make their argument more salient. “It has been said that this bill violated the principle of home rule. Well, the truth about that is this: The present [Davis] law violated the principle of home rule,” Senator White argued on behalf of his equal pay bill in 1908.⁷⁹ In fact, both Senator McCarren, who introduced the first equal pay bill for the women in 1907, and Senator Grady, whose 1911 equal pay bill became the eventual equal pay law, had voted against the Davis Law in 1900 on the grounds of home rule. At the time they objected to the state imposition of salaries. Within a few years and under pressure from the IAWT, however, they both declared that while they objected to mandatory imposition on principle, imposition under the Davis Law was the reality of the situation, and the goal was to make the imposition just.⁸⁰ Some allies teased those claiming sovereignty about this disconnect. “As one listens to the objections which are urged against the amendment of the Davis law and the introduction of the ‘equal pay’ schedules, one would imagine that it had been proposed to repeal the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount,” New York rabbi Stephen Wise suggested at an IAWT mass meeting in 1908, to the amusement of his audience.⁸¹

If home rule was an issue where men attempted to couch their language in that of principle, and equal pay advocates laughed at their inconsistencies, the issue of cost was even more treacherous. Everyone agreed that equalizing pay would cost the city, though there were massively different accounts of how much it would cost, and everyone seemed to have their own estimate. The men teachers and their political allies argued that the cost to the city would be huge and would be an unfair burden on taxpayers. These arguments were asserted in debates, legislative hearings, statements, and vetoes.⁸² The IAWT women countered by gaining the support of taxpayers to speak on their behalf, but mostly by framing it as an issue of justice rather than cost. Here again they brought in male allies, who would bear the brunt of the tax burden. “The only argument I have heard against [equal pay] is that it will increase taxes,” wrote William McAdoo, president of the Hudson and Manhattan Railroad Company, in a public letter

⁷⁸“Urge Dix to Veto Equal Pay Bill,” *New York Times*, Oct. 28, 1911, 7. The Board of Estimate had supported equalizing salaries the previous year but denounced legislative intervention.

⁷⁹Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 343.

⁸⁰Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 350–51, 359, 361; “Legislature Repasses the Davis School Bill,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 4, 1900, 2.

⁸¹“Teachers Applaud Political Equality.”

⁸²“All Teachers Laughed at the Mayor’s Letter”; “Graham Ave. Trade Board”; “Mayor Again Vetoes Teachers’ Pay Bill,” *New York Times*, May 15, 1909, 1; “Teachers’ Fund a Violation of the Law,” *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 1907, 10; “Pass Women Teachers’ Bill,” *New York Times*, March 25, 1908, 8.

in 1909. “Even if this be true, can we continue to perpetrate injustice merely to keep taxes down?”⁸³ The *New York Times* was equally aware of the pitfall of counterposing cost and justice, even as it stood against equal pay. “The argument that ... the city cannot afford to pay the many women as much as it pays the few men ... is utter nonsense,” the paper editorialized in 1907. “What the city cannot afford is to be guilty of admitted, or even of suspected injustice.”⁸⁴ To say that women teachers did not need or deserve equal pay was one thing. To say that women teachers might deserve equal pay but that the cost was too high was a problem, even to many opponents of equal pay and even if, indeed, the cost would be high.

To focus on cost, or on home rule, was to say current salary inequalities might be wrong, but they—the Board of Education, the mayor, the men teachers—were unwilling to fix it. Rabbi Wise, pointing to these inconsistencies at an IAWT mass meeting in 1908, proclaimed: “I take my stand with Superintendent Maxwell, who declares [the Davis Law] to be ‘unjust in many respects,’ with Mayor McClellan, who admits that there ‘is much force in the contention that the present law is unjust,’ and with Governor Hughes, who declares that ‘glaring inequalities now exist.’”⁸⁵ These key figures—the superintendent, mayor, and governor—were all against equal pay in 1908, and two of them were the major obstacles to an equal pay bill. They had all acknowledged problems with pay conditions. If even these powerful figures against equal pay admitted something unjust in the salary disparities, IAWT women and their allies argued, then their suggested fix of equal pay was the only just and reasonable response.

In the end, the women of the IAWT won equal pay because they convinced enough people, in New York City and in Albany, on the street and in politics, that what they were asking for was a simple matter of justice. They argued that as women they were suited to be teachers, and maybe even to be better teachers than men, and they deserved to be compensated as such. They laughed at the idea that they should not be in the classroom, and disavowed the idea that they were not supporting families. They highlighted their love of children while distancing themselves from other women’s movements. They and their allies, including powerful men, suggested that claims that equal pay would damage the city’s sovereignty or finances were unreasonable defenses of an unjust position.

Conclusion

When Mayor Gaynor signed the Grady “Equal Pay” Bill in late October of 1911, forty women teachers and Grace Strachan were present as representatives of the IAWT. Praising Gaynor’s actions, Strachan celebrated that “for the first time in history it will be written in the statutes of the State that there shall be no discrimination in salary against woman on account of her sex.”⁸⁶ This was no small feat. Just three years previously, the US Supreme Court had decided in *Muller v. Oregon* that sex discrimination in employment was legal. Such discrimination would not be banned on the federal

⁸³ Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 404.

⁸⁴ “Topics of the Times.”

⁸⁵ Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 391.

⁸⁶ “Thanks to the Mayor for Equal Pay Bill,” *New York Times*, Oct. 21, 1911, 12.

level until the 1960s. But in 1911—and very nearly in 1907—the women of New York City’s Interborough Association of Women Teachers won their fight to have a ban on sex discrimination in the city’s teacher salaries written into state law.

The IAWT’s success in winning “equal pay for equal work” raises important historical questions about the ways women teachers can push for change and the limits to their activism. The IAWT women were advocating for a change in city and state policy that was premised on a claim of sex equality, and their success was neither guaranteed nor largely precedented. They succeeded, however, because their demand was not seen as unreasonable or hugely radical to much of the voting public of New York City, nor to the elected officials who introduced and voted for their bills. Equal pay was “radical only in the sense of it being radically right!” Rabbi Wise once declared.⁸⁷ Male school officials and teachers lost the fight against equal pay because their foundational claims—that men teachers needed or deserved more money or that women teachers could not or should not be given more pay—were untenable in their political and cultural climate.

The women’s success with the 1911 Grady “Equal Pay” Law was clearly limited. The law equalized salaries only for teachers, not other workers, and eliminated discrimination only on the basis of sex. It maintained the difference in primary and secondary teachers’ salaries. The women of the IAWT foreclosed possibilities of more radical change by limiting their advocacy, their allies, and their goals. But they did undertake massive political activism, won a new law, and set a new precedent. They demonstrated that even if New York was not yet ready for woman’s suffrage, it was ready to accept some rhetoric about sex equality. And perhaps more importantly for the women involved, they demonstrated that they could get politicians and citizens to put the law, and money, behind that new acceptance.

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⁸⁷“Teachers Applaud Political Equality.”