

QUADERNI DEPS 943/2026

A LIBERAL REFORMER'S BLIND SPOT: JOHN BATES CLARK, WOMEN TEACHERS, AND THE «EQUAL PAY FOR EQUAL WORK» DEBATE

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May 2026



A Liberal Reformer's Blind Spot: John Bates Clark, Women Teachers, and the "Equal Pay for Equal Work" Debate

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Abstract: This paper analyzes John Bates Clark's contribution to the "equal pay for equal work" debate on teachers' salaries in early twentieth-century New York, focusing on the tension between his abstract formulation of marginal productivity theory and his applied arguments. It shows how, while his theoretical framework presupposed homogeneous labor remunerated according to marginal product, Clark's treatment of educational labor departed from these assumptions by emphasizing opportunity costs, labor supply, and occupational attractiveness. In the 1909 Teachers' Salary Commission report, he explained gender wage differentials through women's restricted access to alternative employment and further justified them through the family wage doctrine. The paper argues that Clark's intervention marks a shift from a productivity-based account of wages to one accommodating structural inequalities, thereby providing an economic rationale for the persistence of wage discrimination.

JEL Classification: B13; B30; J16; J31;

Keywords: Clark, John Bates; Education, Women; Equal pay for equal work; Marginal Productivity; Progressive era economics

Prof John B. Clark of Columbia university developed the economic side of the argument against equal pay at a gathering held the other day. and was replied to by the equal pay partisans with "So much the worse for economic law." (News of School and College 1910)

1. Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, the campaign of the New York City Interborough Association of Women Teachers (IAWT) for "equal pay for equal work" emerged as a prominent and highly contested public issue, quickly assuming—as contemporaries already recognized—the character of a major social movement (Strachan 1910). This episode has attracted considerable interest in the literature, with several scholars examining it from differing perspectives while emphasizing both the organizational strength of the IAWT and the broader political and gendered dimensions of the controversy (Doherty 1979; Carter 1992 and 2002; D'Amico 2017; Rosenberg 2024). Yet none of these accounts considers the role played by John Bates Clark—a notable absence all the more striking given his prominence within the economics profession and his sustained engagement with questions of distribution and justice (Henry 1995; Fiorito and Vatiero 2023).

Clark's involvement with the issue of teachers' remuneration, however, predates the New York controversy. As early as 1899, he addressed the question in a brief and now largely overlooked essay, "Salaries of Teachers," published in the *Columbia University Quarterly* (Clark 1899). Though modest in scope and intended for a general audience, the piece constituted a considered intervention in the then ongoing debate over teachers' compensation. On that occasion, Clark made no reference to gender differences in pay and did not address the issue of unequal salaries between male and female teachers that would later become central to the IAWT's campaign. A decade later, he returned to the question in a more direct and institutional capacity, when he was appointed by the mayor of New York to serve on a special commission to investigate and report to him on the equalization of the pay of men and women teachers in the public schools of New York. In this role, he became actively involved in the "equal pay for equal work" debate, as the report he coauthored helped to animate the controversy and provoked strong reactions from the IAWT's leadership. Although the report was the product of a three-member commission, Clark was singled out by leaders of the association as chiefly responsible for its reliance on a "supply and demand" approach to the determination of teachers' wages, which they regarded as both analytically misplaced and normatively objectionable.

This paper revisits Clark's contribution to this debate, highlighting the tension between his theoretical commitment to the marginal productivity theory of wages and the practical demands, as an economist in public service, of formulating viable policy recommendations in a highly charged reform

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context. The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reconstructs Clark's early analysis of teachers' salaries, with particular attention to his application of marginal productivity theory and his treatment of the non-market characteristics of educational labor. Section 3 turns to the 1909 Teachers' Salary Commission report, examining its economic reasoning, its treatment of gender-based wage differentials, and the policy alternatives it outlined. Section 4 analyzes the reactions to the report, focusing especially on the criticisms advanced by the IAWT. Section 5 briefly traces the subsequent evolution of the controversy, culminating in the legislative success of the equal pay movement in 1911. Finally, Section 6 draws together the main conclusions and considers their implications for interpreting Clark's contribution in its historical context.

2. Clark on the salaries of teachers

The issue of teachers' compensation took shape in the 1890s, amid the expansion of schooling and the broader process of professionalization. As teaching increasingly claimed the status of a profession, dissatisfaction with pay became more pronounced, with educators frequently denouncing salaries as inadequate relative to their training, responsibilities, and rising living costs, and as inconsistent with their desired professional standing (Goldstein 2014). This growing discontent also generated a steady stream of articles in magazines and professional journals on teachers' salaries (Stricker 1988). It was against this backdrop that Clark intervened in 1899, notably the same year he published his seminal *The Distribution of Wealth*.

Clark opened with a straightforward exposition of the marginal productivity theory of wages. "Wages are determined by economic law," he asserted, and "teachers' salaries are wages" (Clark 1899a, 111). Accordingly, their determination should be understood through the same competitive mechanisms governing other forms of labor remuneration:

All wages are, as I believe, the selling price of a product. In a cotton mill, a steel furnace, or a mine there is a certain part of the day's output that is distinctly attributable to each particular man who works there; and the value of that product competition tends to give to the man as his pay. His wages, then, are gauged by the specific productivity of his labor. Teachers, too, create what may be treated as a real economic product, though it is not as substantial and tangible as is the product of a cotton mill. (112-113)

The "specific productivity" of labor, Clark (113) argued, depends critically on the number of workers engaged in a given occupation. An increase in labor supply diminishes each worker's marginal contribution, such that "[d]ouble the number of workers in any calling... [and] you reduce, by a large fraction, the product that any one of them can create." A key implication follows for inter-occupational wage differentials: "[c]omparative wages, then, are influenced by the comparative number of workers in the different employments." Labor mobility across sectors thus reshapes relative wages, raising pay in occupations that workers exit and lowering it in those they enter.

Clark however noted that this general productivity principle must be applied with caution in the case of teaching.² In this domain, he wrote, "not many teachers earn their pay by bringing tuition fees into the treasuries of their schools," and fewer still could expect students to compensate institutions in accordance with the full "social value" of the educational services they receive. Educational institutions, he insisted, are constituted and sustained to generate "inappropriable utilities" that are, in contemporary jargon, largely non-excludable, and not fully captured through market exchange. Teachers are therefore employed to generate benefits that accrue broadly to society without being directly priced or fully appropriated through fees. As a result, the marginal productivity principle operates indirectly. Teachers' salaries are determined not by the value of their output within education, but by what they could earn in alternative occupations. Accordingly, the key question becomes: "How much must a school pay to keep a man from going into a law office or a counting room?" (114). In this

² It should be noted that Clark used the term "teacher" indiscriminately, without distinguishing between elementary, secondary, and high school teachers and college or university professors.

way, wages in teaching are anchored to opportunity costs—what individuals believe they could earn elsewhere.

Notwithstanding the role of alternative earnings in shaping academic salaries, Clark argued that universities could attract capable individuals at pay levels below those available in business due to the nonpecuniary advantages of academic life. Individuals might rationally prefer “two thousand dollars plus the other inducements” to higher monetary returns (116). Drawing on Adam Smith’s discussion of compensating differentials, Clark maintained that teaching’s appeal lies in its combination of intrinsic rewards, flexible employment, and relatively low risk, together with the premium placed on trustworthiness.³ Central among these is the “agreeableness” of the work: the intellectual satisfaction of advancing and communicating “scientific truth,” such that “there is no computing how much a man with a scientific spirit may be willing to forego rather than to give up the work of discovery” (116–117). Taken together, these considerations render teaching “exceptionally attractive,” enabling institutions to recruit qualified personnel at comparatively low pecuniary rates (117–118). The resulting equilibrium reflects not equality of earnings across occupations but parity in their “general attractiveness” (118). Thus, a teacher may be retained for a fixed salary supplemented by “other good and valuable considerations,” whereas individuals “of like ability,” whose remuneration consists primarily in money, must command higher pecuniary returns.

Clark nonetheless emphasized that the wage gap had concrete consequences. Because teachers rely on salaries that fall below those of similarly educated professionals, they experience “a feeling of relative impoverishment,” arising less from absolute need than from comparison with their peers (118–119). This may generate dissatisfaction and encourage recourse to “pot-boiling” work, potentially “fatal to that scientific work which produces much for humanity but little for the men who do it.” While higher salaries might improve performance—since “more pay given to the same man might ... make a better teacher and a far greater scientist of him”—Clark argued that the stronger case concerns recruitment: increased pay would “secure better teachers” by permitting more selective hiring. Yet institutional constraints create a persistent “deadlock,” as limited resources force a trade-off between the number and quality of instructors, while competition from more lucrative occupations remains.

Only limited relief, Clark concluded (120), lies in a stricter process of selection, choosing those “best as a teacher” and thereby promoting “a more marked differentiation of men in different occupations.” This would allow schools to appoint individuals specifically suited to scholarly life and to value them not simply by what they “could have produced and secured elsewhere,” but by “what they are worth to the school itself.” Even so, the constraint is ultimately inescapable: “at bottom the general rate of teachers’ pay must be determined by the earning capacity of persons of like qualities in other callings.” At most, institutions that “bid high for teachers and get preeminently good ones” may place them “more nearly on a par with their intellectual peers”; for the profession as a whole, however, relative disadvantage persists.

3. Equal pay for equal work? The “Teachers’ Salary Commission” report

In his 1899 essay on teachers’ salaries, Clark assessed the adequacy of teachers’ compensation in relation to other professions, without addressing wage differentials between men and women. This silence is significant, as gender wage discrepancies among teachers had already begun to receive public and scholarly attention.⁴ The issue became more entrenched with the passage of the New York State Davis Law of 1900, which established a standardized salary schedule in New York City’s public

³ “The five following are the principal circumstances which [...] make up for a small pecuniary gain in some employments, and counterbalance a great one in others. First, the agreeableness or disagreeableness of the employments themselves; secondly, the easiness and cheapness, or the difficulty and expense of learning them; thirdly, the constancy or inconstancy of employment in them; fourthly, the small or great trust which must be reposed in those who exercise them; and, fifthly, the probability or improbability of success in them” (Smith 1977 [1776], 202). This passage continues to be widely cited in contemporary scholarship—particularly within labor economics—as one of the earliest explicit formulations of what is now termed compensating wage differentials. See, among many others, Ehrenberg and Smith 2018.

⁴ See the extended bibliography in Dyke 1899.

schools. While this reform curtailed discretionary wage setting and strengthened administrative uniformity, it simultaneously institutionalized gender-based pay disparities by maintaining separate scales for “male” and “female” teachers performing identical duties (Carter 1982; Rosenberg 2024). These disparities soon became the object of organized opposition. As Grace Strachan (1910), leader of the IAWT, argued, the system subordinated merit, experience, and professional standing to sex, thereby producing “unfair and inequitable” conditions. Under her leadership, the IAWT rapidly emerged as a major representative body for women teachers and recast the issue as one of justice rather than remuneration, asserting that “equal pay for equal work” constituted a moral and civic imperative.⁵

This mobilization culminated in a series of legislative initiatives, most notably the White Bill of 1907, introduced by Horace White. Although the measure—designed to eliminate gender-based salary distinctions—passed both houses of the New York State Legislature, it failed to secure the approval of Governor Charles Evans Hughes, who vetoed it. A renewed bill in 1909 met a similar fate, being rejected once more, explicitly on financial grounds (Doherty 1979; Carter 2002; Rosenberg 2024). At the municipal level, New York City mayor George B. McClellan Jr., who had opposed the equal pay movement, responded by appointing a special commission to investigate teachers’ salaries and the comparative remuneration of men and women. In response, and as anticipated in his veto message, this initiative led to the establishment of a formal inquiry. After an initial set of appointments proved unworkable, a reconstituted commission formally came into existence on November 29, 1909. In addition to Clark, it comprised Gustav H. Schwab and Charles H. Keep. Schwab, of the firm Oelrichs & Co., and Keep, president of the Knickerbocker Trust Co., were prominent figures in the business and financial sectors, whereas Clark was the sole academic member. Operating under the constraint imposed by the imminent expiration of McClellan’s term at the end of December, the commission conducted a compressed but intensive inquiry and submitted its report on December 28, 1909 (Doherty 1979; Rosenberg 2024).⁶

Defining its purpose as that of “ascertain[ing] the annual cost of the various proposed schemes for equalizing the pay of male and female teachers in New York City’s public [elementary and high] schools,” the report began by estimating the financial implications of those proposed salary-equalization plans. It presented two alternative calculations: equalizing the salaries of women teaching in the same grades as men would entail an annual cost of \$7,837,662, while extending equalization across the entire system would raise the cost to \$11,426,501. The commission also noted that the IAWT did not demand full system-wide equalization but instead supported the provisions of the White Bill of 1907, which, among other things, established higher minimum salaries, required that assistants to principals be paid more than grade teachers, and stipulated a reduction in the period required for women teachers to reach the maximum salary from sixteen to twelve years. The commission, however, declared itself unable to compute the probable additional cost of this measure, since the bill left the actual determination of salaries above the minimum to the discretion of the Board of Education.

The report then turned to the underlying causes of wage differentials, grounding its analysis in what it described as “certain facts” regarded as “matters either of common knowledge, or of universal belief,” and thus not requiring further investigation. At this juncture, the commission’s position assumes a more controversial character. A first element is the report’s implicit acceptance of the then prominent “family wage” doctrine, according to which men were understood as primary breadwinners whose earnings should sustain an entire household, while women’s income was treated as secondary or supplementary.⁷ As the report put it:

⁵ Grace C. Strachan (later Forsythe) (1863–1922) was an American educator and school administrator from Buffalo, New York. Educated at local normal schools and later at New York University, she began teaching at sixteen and moved to New York City in 1893, where she advanced rapidly in the public school system. In 1900, she became District Superintendent of Schools, a post she held for over two decades. In 1906, she was the leading figure in the formation of the IAWT (Forsythe, Grace C. Strachan 1924).

⁶ The report appears in the bibliography of Clark’s writings, published as an appendix to his *Festschrift* (Hollander, ed, 1927), and a copy of the report is held among his archival papers at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia University.

⁷ It should be noted that, during the Progressive Era, numerous school districts instituted “marriage bars” that prohibited women teachers, particularly in elementary education, from remaining employed after marriage. These

In the general market for labor, men command higher wages than women. This fact imposes hardship on the women who have children or relatives dependent upon them and favors men who have no one to support but themselves. It has a beneficent effect in the case of married women and young children whose support is provided by a male wage-earner.

Both public and private schools, the report continued, rely for their supply of teachers on the general labor market and insofar as they remunerate labor at prevailing market rates, “they are forced to give to men more than they give to women of the same grade of ability and attainments.” Women’s lower salaries do not reflect differences in productivity but rather their lower reservation wages, itself a function of restricted occupational mobility. Because women’s opportunity cost of remaining in teaching was comparatively low, the supply of female labor to the profession was correspondingly high, exerting downward pressure on their wages.⁸ In the words of the report:

teaching is one of the best occupations open on a large scale to women and, therefore, attracts them in large numbers, while to men many other occupations are open which are, on the whole, more remunerative and attractive. The very large proportion of women now employed in the public schools is due to the fact that they have been and can be obtained at a smaller compensation than that paid to male teachers.

The report highlighted a pronounced gender imbalance within New York’s public school system, noting that women overwhelmingly dominated the lower grades, where men were either absent or present in very small numbers, meaning their removal would have little effect on how the system operated. By contrast, men were more substantially represented in upper grades and high schools, where, including administrative roles, they comprised roughly one-third of the teaching force. Consequently, the issue of salary equalization was not uniformly distributed across the system but emerged as “a real and serious problem” particularly in the upper grades. The report further contended that, where men were employed, they should be able to “compare well with the women who are associated with them,” while insisting on a disparity in incentives, noting that “the rate of pay which will attract women of high quality does not suffice to attract men of an equally high grade.”

The report further maintained that private schools, in setting teachers’ salaries, were generally required to adhere closely to “prevailing market rates of pay,” whereas public schools were able to offer such rates “plus a certain addition.” Should a community elect to grant teachers a premium above ordinary earnings, it argued, this premium ought to be “equitably apportioned” among the different groups with legitimate claims upon it. The crucial issue thus became—though the report addressed it only implicitly—“whether it would or would not be equitable to give to women the very large premium above market rates which would result from raising their pay to the level of that of the male teachers.”

In the final part of the report, the argument moved beyond wage determination and advanced a pedagogical justification for maintaining gender differentiation within the school system. The commission suggested that in this case the issue could not be reduced to the relative market value of male and female teachers, since education allegedly benefited from the presence of both sexes. Although it conceded that women might predominate—and even that in the lower grades “no men may be needed”—it nonetheless maintained that an all-female system entailed “a loss in education,” as pupils were thought to require exposure to “masculine intellects.” Sexual difference was thus recast not merely as a labor-market fact but as an educational necessity. The relevant standard was no longer individual productivity or relative market opportunities, but, in the words of the report, the “collective

measures were typically enforced through administrative regulations and contractual provisions adopted by local boards of education. Elizabeth Strachan herself supported the New York Board of Education’s exclusion of married women from teaching positions, arguing that the domestic responsibilities attendant upon marriage were incompatible with the effective discharge of pedagogical duties (Rosenberg 2004).

⁸ This was consistent with the views expressed by Clark in his 1899 essay on eachers’ salaries.

efficiency” of the teaching body.⁹ This justified the continued employment of men, particularly in the upper grades, on grounds only loosely connected to the equal-pay issue, implying that a feminized system was pedagogically incomplete—a view consistent with broader Progressive Era concerns about the feminization of teaching and the perceived need for male authority within the school system (Tyack 1974; Blount 1998).

Against this background, the report reduced the policy alternatives to five options.

1. It might raise the pay of all women above the sixth grade to the level of the present salaries of men, leaving the schedules unchanged in the lower six grades. This would give no increase of salaries to the great majority of women in the schools, but would give a very large increase to the minority who are in the higher grades and already receive the higher rates. It would treat very unequally two classes of women and is not desired by the Association of Women Teachers.
2. It is possible to raise in this way the salaries of women in the upper grades and also to make a corresponding addition to those of women in the lower grades, regardless of the question whether there are or are not any men employed in such lower grades. This would give to the men pay based on the market rate for more or less similar labor, and would give to the women a very large addition to such market rate. The figures submitted to us by the Board of Education show that, if the men’s salaries remain unchanged, this system would entail an additional cost to the City of about \$11,000,000.— per annum.
3. A more moderate increase might be made in the rate of pay for all women, leaving the pay of the men unchanged. This would not bring the pay of the two classes to equality, but it would not exclude the men from positions where they are needed.
4. It would be possible to make this moderate increase in the pay of all women and either suddenly or gradually to reduce to the same level the pay of all the men, so that the rates for the two classes would be ultimately equalized. This, of course, would drive the more valuable men out of the school system.
5. It is possible to remove from the present schedules any glaring inequalities which are now to be found. This course would probably give a material increase of salary to a large body of women, including those in the lower grades.

The remainder of the discussion was cautious and, in the main, inconclusive. While the commission outlined five possible policy options, it refrained from indicating any clear preference among them, presenting each as a hypothetical course of action rather than as a recommended solution. It acknowledged that “a thorough testing of these alternatives... cannot possibly be made” within the available time and called for “searching and specific inquiries” into “why the public schools need men,” in which grades they were required, and “what, if anything, a man teacher contributes that is not equally contributed by a woman teacher.”

4. The reactions

Despite its ostensibly neutral and non-committal tone, the report of the commission on Teachers’ Salaries generated polarized responses, reflecting the broader tensions surrounding the equal pay controversy. In general terms, it was widely perceived as unfavorable to the principle of equal remuneration for equal work. The *New York Times*, for instance, headlined “Against Equal Pay to School Teachers” (1909) and noted that the commission advised denial of the demand “because men command higher wages.”¹⁰ Among those who sided with the commission’s conclusions was Edgar S. Shumway, president of the Male High School Teachers’ Association. In a letter to the *New York Times* (Teachers’ Salaries 1910), he affirmed that the report contained “nothing... to injure the feelings of any teacher,” while acknowledging that difficult living conditions affected both men and women. He

⁹ According to the report: “[t]he principle of collective efficiency, as distinguished from merely individual efficiency, is at the basis of current practice in the selection of teachers, and a group of teachers should be considered in its entirety and made up in a way that insures the highest efficiency. To this end, it should include men and women in the proper proportions; and it is safe to affirm that in all probability school systems will actually do this” (Commission on Teachers’ Salaries 1909).

¹⁰ The *New York Tribune* adopted a nearly identical title (Against Equal Pay 1909).

nonetheless dismissed the agitation for equal pay as unwarranted and cautioned against attempts to “provoke sex antagonism” or to marginalize dissenting teachers. Far more forceful was Edgar J. Levey, Deputy Comptroller of New York City, who defended the commission’s conclusions by rejecting the equal pay campaign as a misleading appeal to justice. Under existing conditions, he contended (*The Equal Pay Fallacy* 1910, 209), a woman teacher receiving the same salary as a man would in fact be “greatly overpaid,” since equalization would impose an “artificial standard of salaries... far in excess of market values.” From this perspective, equal pay was not only unjustified but economically inefficient: it would distort remuneration structures, misallocate public resources, and impose substantial fiscal burdens, thereby hindering the city’s capacity to address “pressing problems of civic progress and development” (210).¹¹

Dissenting voices were far more numerous, and it is hardly surprising to find Grace Strachan, the charismatic leader of the IAWT, at the forefront of the protest. In a series of editorials—later republished together with other materials in her *Equal Pay for Equal Work* (1910)—Strachan openly challenged the commission’s conclusions. “[The] report submitted in December 1909,” she affirmed (34), “decided nothing, and added nothing new to the discussion, but made much of the ‘Law of Supply and Demand.’” More broadly, she argued that none of its recommendations went “to the heart of the matter,” serving instead mainly to underscore the difficulties involved in reaching a satisfactory solution (448). Addressing her response directly to Clark—whom she regarded as chiefly responsible for the overall orientation of the report—she went on:

I have enough of the Political and Social Economist sense to recognize and acknowledge that the ratio of the normal or natural supply of any commodity to the normal or natural demand for such commodity is a valid basis for regulating the cost or selling price of same. But I have also enough of common sense and good judgment to differentiate the Supply-and-Demand arguments which are forced, abnormal, spurious and inapplicable, from those that are real and applicable. (92-93)

The teaching profession, she maintained, did not operate as an open market: entry was restricted to candidates placed on eligible lists, qualifications were determined by statutory and administrative rules rather than by “Nature’s laws” (93), and the supply of teachers depended on the frequency and organization of examinations. Demand, in turn, was shaped by the number and distribution of pupils across grades, as well as by institutional preferences that overwhelmingly favored women teachers in the lower grades. In this regulated setting, she contended, the conditions required for the free operation of market forces were simply absent.

Strachan (94-95) further pressed her critique through a “*reductio ad absurdum*.” Even if one were to accept the logic of supply and demand, she argued, its application would lead to paradoxical conclusions. Noting that there existed an “Association of Unappointed Men Teachers”—an organization with no female equivalent—actively seeking positions, that male candidates often waited longer for appointment, and that some had even resorted to legal action to secure posts for which women with lower examination scores had been appointed, she concluded that, by the same reasoning, one would have to claim that “the supply of men teachers is greater than the supply of women teachers”—and therefore that men, not women, should command lower salaries. The contradiction, she implied, showed that the “Supply-and-Demand arguments” advanced by the commission were “forced, abnormal, spurious and inapplicable” to the realities of the public school system.

Critics also took issue with what they saw as the commission’s apparent endorsement of the “family wage” doctrine. According to Strachan (8), if applied consistently, the principle would necessitate that salaries be determined according to each worker’s family circumstances—an approach she regarded as both inequitable and unduly intrusive, as it would entail an “inquiry into one’s private life.” She further challenged the assumption that women lacked dependents, arguing that this

¹¹ Levey was echoed by an anonymous editorialist in *The Outlook* (*Equal Pay for Equal Work* 1910, 737), who, while conceding that “the law of supply and demand may not absolutely control the rate of wages,” insisted that it “is not to be disregarded.” Any imposed equalization, he warned, would have harmful consequences: raising women’s salaries would lead to their displacement by men, whereas reducing men’s pay would provoke “a general exodus of men from the public schools,” leaving a “wholly feminine institution” with “disastrous results to the community.”

claim was demonstrably false. In support of this position, Elizabeth Du Bois Peck (1910, 313), a fellow IAWT affiliate, underscored the significant family responsibilities borne by unmarried women teachers, observing that “ninety-one per cent. of the women had one or more persons dependent upon her,” often including “an aged father or mother” or younger relatives. In certain instances, these obligations extended further still, with women assuming full financial responsibility for members of their extended families.

The extensive newspaper coverage of the IAWT’s campaign also allows us to reconstruct a particularly revealing episode in the equal pay controversy. On January 23, 1910, John Bates Clark appeared as a speaker at a meeting of the City Club of New York, where the question of equal pay for men and women teachers was publicly debated. The City Club, a key center of Progressive Era reform—promoting honest government, urban improvement, and social welfare—had supported the IAWT from its early stages, making the encounter especially significant. During the meeting, Clark was directly challenged by Grace Strachan, alongside Mary Chalmers and Lina E. Gano, two prominent educators and activists within the association. That Clark was the sole invitee among the three authors of the Commission’s report is noteworthy: it suggests his visible role in articulating and defending its conclusions, and helps explain why contemporaries associated him closely with its underlying reasoning. While we remain fully aware of the limitations inherent in relying heavily on newspapers as historical sources (Salmon 1923; Knudson 1993; Vella 2009), the convergence across multiple, albeit fragmentary, reports of the City Club event, lends a significant degree of credibility to the reconstruction offered here.

Clark opened by defending the economic logic underpinning the commission’s report. Writing in the *Daily People*, Daniel De Leon (1910)—leading figure in the Socialist Labor Party of America and co-founder of the Industrial Workers of the World—noted that Clark grounded his argument in the claim that “the law of supply and demand must control wages of teachers, as it controls the wages of all other wage earners.” Other contemporary newspapers convey a similar line of reasoning. As the *New York Times* (*Discuss Equal Pay at the City Club 1910*) reported, Clark acknowledged the desirability of employing both men and women as teachers, but emphasized that men were “particularly needed in the upper grades, where one-third of the teachers are men.” If the Board of Education sought to secure adequate efficiency and entered the labor market for male teachers, “it must be conceded... that it must pay more to the men than the women.” As he put it, “men do get more in the open market,” and no employer “could afford to pay more to men if he could get as efficient women at the lower rate”; by the same logic, public and private schools, constrained by competition, “must pay more for their men.”

Clark further argued that any premium above market-determined wages should be justified in social rather than individual terms. In practice, this meant privileging children as the ultimate beneficiaries—an argument that implicitly favored men as primary earners. Here, Clark more explicitly reiterated the family wage theory already advanced in the commission’s report, using it to justify gender-based pay differentials. Once again, contemporary accounts converge on this point. The *New York Times* noted that according to Clark, although higher male wages conformed to supply and demand, “the principal beneficiaries are not the men... but the young children dependent on them.” Similarly, the *Sun* (*City Club Talks Equal Pay 1910*) reported Clark’s contention that disregarding market laws would entail arbitrary favoritism: “if we single out any class to be favored... we ought to choose the children,” which in turn required “to give the fathers enough money so that the mothers shall not have to leave the home to help support the family.”

Clark (*Discuss Equal Pay at the City Club 1910*) conceded that in the higher grades “women’s pay might be raised to the level of the men, just because men were also employed,” reflecting the second option considered in the report. However, this approach would require “the increase of the pay of 14,000 women on account of 3,000 men,” costing the city of New York just under eight million dollars. As an alternative, “the pay of the women might be raised a little and the pay of the men cut a little,” but, he warned, “this would drive out the better class of men.” Ultimately, Clark was willing to recognize that “women should be paid adequately,” noting that this would remedy the “most glaring inequalities” (same wording of the report) in the teaching profession. Yet, he concluded—somewhat ambiguously—that the proper course for reaching this end was “to disregard as a basis of action any comparison between the pay of men and women teachers” (*Women Teachers Count on New Administration 1910*).

In her rejoinder, Strachan (City Club Talks Equal Pay 1910) dismissed the law of supply and demand as a “fetish which the political economists can’t help talking about,” arguing that the economic dimension of sex equality must be understood within a broader moral framework grounded in the equal dignity of the sexes. She again ridiculed the claim that male teachers required higher salaries because they supported families and had more dependents, countering that women, too, frequently shared in the burden of supporting others. As quoted in the *New York Times* (Discuss Equal Pay at the City Club 1910), she rhetorically asked:

Do you think that this is to me a mere question of how many dollars I should get? Would I have given four years of my life to it, if I had not thought it a great moral question? Prof. Clark has talked of married men teachers, but I know that one of our principal opponents was a bachelor and I know of two other teachers who have been separated from their wives. Then some men marry women better off than themselves.

Strachan also questioned the assumption that men were indispensable in the higher grades of schooling (“I haven’t been able to find out why men are so necessary in certain grades”), and concluded by noting that the cost of equalizing teachers’ salaries below the sixth grade had been estimated by the IAWT at \$6,000,000—\$2,000,000 less than the figure advanced by Clark and the commission (Salaries of Teachers Discussed at Luncheon 1910).

5. A coda

From January 1910 onward, Grace Strachan and her fellow members of the IAWT intensified their campaign through a more coordinated and explicitly political strategy—a shift already visible in their intervention at the City Club meeting. Their efforts combined public advocacy with institutional engagement: they mobilized press support, organized meetings, cultivated alliances with reform organizations, and lobbied municipal and state authorities. Crucially, they framed their demand not as a sectional claim but as a matter of justice and professional equivalence, aligning it with the broader reformist language of the Progressive Era (Carter, 2002; Rosenberg, 2024).

A further development occurred later in 1910, when a new Commission on Teachers’ Salaries was established by the Board of Estimate and Apportionment, following the election and inauguration of William Jay Gaynor as mayor. This body—distinct from the earlier mayoral commission on which Clark had served—submitted its report to the Board of Estimate and Apportionment on 17 October 1910.¹² The new report intervened, implicitly but directly, in addressing the same question of equal pay for teachers. It examined the claim that wage differentials reflected general market forces, noting that this argument had “frequently been invoked” to justify higher wages for men on the assumption of their relative scarcity. The report challenged this argument, emphasizing that teachers were drawn from “eligible lists,” so that the supply was limited by “the frequency and character of the examinations” (89–90). The evidence further contradicted the premise of scarcity: “the supply of men candidates, the relative supply of successful candidates, and the proportion of men appointed are all greater than the present proportion of men in the service,” while “a larger percentage of the women candidates” was appointed (89–90). On this basis, the Commission concluded that “the law of supply and demand is not the controlling factor” in explaining wage differentials (90). In this respect, the report aligned closely with the criticisms advanced by Strachan and the IAWT, emphasizing the regulated character of the system and distancing itself—without explicit reference—from the approach Clark had defended.

This shift moved the debate away from economic explanations and toward institutional considerations, reinforcing the IAWT’s effort to present equal pay as a “simple matter of justice” and a practical reform (Rosenberg, 2024). Building on this momentum, Strachan and her allies extended their campaign to the state level, forging political alliances and mobilizing electoral pressure. By maintaining a focused and pragmatic objective, they succeeded in presenting equal pay as a concrete and

¹² The reconstituted commission was chaired by Clinton L. Rossiter, a civic leader and public official in New York City, and included two prominent statisticians—Leonard P. Ayres and Lee K. Frankel—both affiliated with the Russell Sage Foundation, but no professional economist.

achievable reform (Doherty, 1979; Carter, 2002). The culmination came in 1911 with the passage of the Grady “Equal Pay” Bill, which established that teachers’ salaries in New York City were to be determined by position and experience rather than by sex. The law marked a clear and decisive victory for the IAWT. Within a remarkably short period—barely five years from the association’s founding—the campaign had moved from organized protest to legislative success. As Strachan declared at the moment of victory, “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” (quoted in Rosenberg 2024, 42).

There is no evidence that John Bates Clark revisited the issue of women teachers’ salaries following his service on the 1909 commission. He did, however, offer general observations on women’s compensation in a brief 1913 article in which he cautiously endorsed minimum wage legislation (Prasch 1999; Fishback and Seltzer 2021). Clark argued that a binding minimum wage “may be clearly and wholly legitimate” where employers were able to hire workers for less than their “worth as measured by the productivity test” (292). The consequences for women, he suggested, were twofold. On the one hand, such legislation would prevent them from receiving less than a living wage sufficient to ensure “a life of modest comfort” (293). This, he specified, would also protect them from the temptation of prostitution or, in his words, of bartering “virtue for food” (290).¹³ On the other hand, he warned that sufficiently high wage floors would be expected to displace “lower grade” workers from employment, with women likely to be particularly affected because of their “limited opportunities” and weak bargaining power. “Enforcing a minimum wage of ten or twelve dollars a week for working women,” he predicted (290-291), “would cause a grand exodus from many industries.” Accordingly, he advocated emergency relief for those left unemployed—“the state will come to the rescue of its own victims” (296)—but, in a manner consistent with his earlier stance, remained silent on wage differentials between men and women and proposed no specific measures to protect women from economic discrimination.

6. Final considerations

In light of the discussion above, it is useful to return to the broader historiographical assessment of Clark’s work with respect to the tension between his theoretical framework and his position in the equal pay debate. It has been argued that:

Neither Clark nor Hicks raised the possibility that different workers might receive different levels of pay for the same or similar work. Both economists wrote at a high level of abstraction, without references to actual economic conditions... Neither developed a theory of discrimination. Discrimination would, in fact, violate their understanding of the natural law of markets, since it would imply paying less for some labor (and possibly more for other) than its marginal product, on a systematic rather than accidental basis. (Figart, Mutari, and Power 2002, 44)

With respect to Clark, this assessment is in an important sense well founded. In his theoretical writings, he did not explicitly consider the possibility that workers performing the same or similar tasks might receive different remuneration. His marginal productivity theory presupposed a class of homogeneous and *interchangeable* workers, such that diminishing labor productivity resulted from a fixed capital stock distributed across an increasing number of laborers.¹⁴ Differences between marginal and inframarginal workers reflected not variations in individual characteristics, but differences in the amount of capital available per worker (Tobin 1985; Persky 2000). Accordingly, Clark (1891, 576) firmly rejected the idea, advanced by some, that marginal workers were “men of a personal quality too poor to yield a rent.”

¹³ As Clark acknowledged, the connection between low wages for women and prostitution had been advanced by his Columbia colleague and close associate, Henry Rogers Seager, in his defense of minimum wage legislation (Seager 1913).

¹⁴ Clark (1899b, 107) wrote: “[b]y effective standards all men’s labor is equally important, provided that the men are interchangeable. The friction that the interchange encounters is, again, an element for separate study. In the absence of friction, men who can be moved from place to place are of equal effective importance and get equal pay—that is, the amount that the marginal workers produce.”

Our discussion, however, has shown that, in his contribution to the debate over the equalization of teachers' salaries, Clark departed from this theoretical ideal in at least two fundamental respects. First, he abandoned the assumption of the interchangeability of labor, emphasizing instead the difference and complementarity of men and women as teachers. In this connection, he openly acknowledged the "superior moral worth of women" in the lower grades of teaching, while simultaneously reinforcing the then prevailing opinion that male teachers were especially suited to instruction at the higher levels (Discuss Equal Pay at the City Club 1910). This shift is reflected in the emphasis placed, in the commission report he coauthored, on the notion of the "collective efficiency" of a gender-mixed teaching staff, as distinct from "mere individual efficiency" of single teachers (New York Commission on Teachers' Salaries 1909). Second, Clark offered an account in which competitive forces equalize wages not to the marginal productivity of the service rendered, but to the overall attractiveness of the occupation, itself shaped by the range of alternative employments available to men and women. On this view, he argued, women's more limited access to such alternatives operates to justify their lower wages as teachers. Quite pragmatically, if one may use the term, Clark treated this disadvantage as a market datum rather than as a condition to be remedied. To strengthen his claim, both in the report and in his subsequent statements, he also adhered to the family wage doctrine, a common staple of the period, explicitly arguing that higher male wages were warranted by their role in supporting dependents.

In conclusion, it can be affirmed that Clark was far more liberal than the bulk of his contemporaries. The inherent egalitarianism of his marginal productivity theory clearly set him apart from strands of Progressive Era reform shaped by racist and eugenic assumptions (Leonard 2003; 2016). Unlike many of his colleagues of the time, including theoretically inclined figures like Irving Fisher, Frank Taussig, or Thomas Nixon Carver, Clark never expressed racial prejudice or hostility toward immigrants, nor did he suggest female inferiority in any meaningful way. However, somewhat unexpectedly, when addressing the question of equal pay for teachers, he proved willing to accommodate positions that ultimately reinforced existing social and "biological" hierarchies, thus appearing, in this respect, more a product of his time than a fully committed liberal reformer.

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