

**Unpicking Gender:
The Long Journey of Home Economics from Tradition to Transformation in
Malta**

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Abstract: This study explores gender issues in the development of Home Economics in Malta, within the context of a traditionally patriarchal and Catholic society. It examines the historical and cultural forces that shaped these subjects as female-dominated domains and the subsequent efforts to address gender bias. The main objective was to investigate how gender roles have influenced the perception, teaching and curriculum of Home Economics, including Textiles Studies, and to evaluate policy shifts aimed at creating more inclusive educational environments. A multi-dimensional qualitative research design was employed, drawing on documentary analysis, interviews with educators and examination of policy and curriculum documents. Thematic analysis was used to interpret narratives from past and present stakeholders in the education system. Findings reveal a deep-rooted gender bias in curriculum content and subject accessibility, with Home Economics traditionally reserved for girls. Despite reforms, perceptions of the subject as "feminine" persist, and male students and teachers continue to face stereotyping. While significant strides have been made towards gender inclusivity, Home Economics remains gender-intensive; that is, it continues to be strongly associated with one gender due to historically embedded cultural norms, patterns of participation, and curricular meanings. Greater curricular reform and cultural change are needed to foster inclusivity and redefine the subjects' social and vocational value.

Keywords: Gender bias, Home Economics, Curriculum reform, Educational policy.

Introduction

The development of Home Economics in Malta must be understood within the broader socio-historical context of a traditionally patriarchal and Catholic society, in which gender roles were clearly delineated and domestic labour was naturalised as women's responsibility (Connell, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Across Europe, the emergence of Home Economics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was part of wider nation-building projects that sought to professionalise domesticity and regulate family life by applying scientific principles to household management (Stage & Vincenti, 1997). In the Maltese context, this trajectory was further shaped by colonial governance and religious doctrine, both of which reinforced normative ideals of femininity centred on motherhood, caregiving, and domestic responsibility (Portelli, 2016).

The various terms used to refer to Home Economics and Textiles Studies as school subjects in Malta, including Domestic Economy, Domestic Science, Domestic Studies, Housecraft, and Needlework/Needlecraft, are used in this paper in accordance with the nomenclature adopted during the specific historical period under discussion.

All these subjects can be described as gender-intensive, reflecting their long-standing historical, cultural and institutional association with femininity in both participation and symbolic meaning. Within this framework, Home Economics and related subjects such as Textiles Studies became institutionalised as gendered domains, contributing to the reproduction of socially constructed divisions between the public and private spheres. They are widely recognised as gendered fields not simply due to higher female enrolment, but because of their deep-rooted links to roles associated with domesticity, care and reproduction. This orientation is further reinforced at curricular and institutional levels. Needlework, for example, was historically introduced as a subject exclusively for girls, strengthening its gendered identity and constraining its development into a more inclusive or professionally oriented discipline (Portelli, 2016).

As Connell (2002) argues, educational structures play a critical role in sustaining gender regimes, while Yuval-Davis (1997) highlights the centrality of women's roles in the cultural reproduction of the nation. In Malta, these dynamics positioned Home Economics not merely as a practical subject, but as

a key site through which ideals of womanhood and citizenship were transmitted across generations.

This article explores gender issues in the development of Home Economics in Malta by tracing its historical evolution and examining how gendered assumptions have shaped its perception, curriculum and pedagogy over time. It considers both the structural forces that established the subject as a female-dominated field and the subsequent policy and curricular reforms aimed at promoting greater inclusivity. Through this lens, the study interrogates the extent to which such reforms have challenged, or alternatively reproduced, entrenched gender norms.

Drawing on a multi-dimensional qualitative research design, the study integrates documentary analysis, life-history narratives and contemporary perspectives from educators to provide a comprehensive account of change and continuity within the subject. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to broader debates on gender, curriculum history and educational reform by highlighting the persistent influence of cultural and ideological factors on subject identity and participation.

Literature review

This literature review examines the convergence of gender identity and curricular specialisation, with a particular focus on the historical and contemporary trajectories of Home Economics and Textiles Studies. By analysing the points where sociocultural expectations and educational policy meet, this section investigates how these subjects have transitioned from tools of domestic reinforcement to modern platforms for life skills development (Erjavšek, 2021). This convergence of traditional gender roles and shifting pedagogical aims reveals a complex narrative of both professionalisation and persistent stigmatisation, particularly as these disciplines increasingly intersect with broader themes of sustainability and economic autonomy (UN Women, 2023).

The historical legacy of domesticity

Historically, Home Economics and Needlework (often termed Domestic Subjects) were designed to formalise the domestic skills associated with femininity. Heinmäe et al. (2025) note that these subjects emerged in the late 19th century to elevate the status of women's work, yet they simultaneously

reinforced the private sphere as a uniquely female domain. Erjavšek (2021) argues that this social and cultural determinism has long tied the discipline to traditional family management, nutrition and textiles. While these subjects were popular, they were often underfunded and criticised by later feminist movements for preparing girls for domestic service or marriage rather than professional careers (Portelli, 2016; Trasberg, 2025). Similarly, Väänänen and Pöllänen (2021) demonstrate that craft education in Finland was historically structured around a clear gender divide, with textile-based activities associated with girls and technical materials with boys, reinforcing broader societal expectations about gender roles.

Gender stereotypes and subject choice: mechanisms of curricular segregation

Despite the modernisation of curricula and the adoption of gender-neutral titles, such as Family and Consumer Sciences, school subjects remain fundamentally gendered in both perception and practice. Research by the OECD (2022) and UNESCO (2024) indicates that gender stereotypes are deeply internalised long before elective stages, creating a "leaky pipeline" where students opt out of subjects that conflict with their perceived social identities. This institutional bias is often reinforced through organisational logistics. Smyth (2025) and ESRI (2021) highlight how "scheduling constraints" frequently force a choice between traditionally feminine and masculine disciplines, such as timetabling Home Economics against Engineering. This structural forced choice signals that these fields are mutually exclusive, effectively maintaining domestic-based subjects as female-dominated enclaves.

The psychological burden of these boundaries is particularly acute for students who deviate from the norm, such as boys who choose Home Economics or Needlework. According to Smyth (2025), these students often experience identity dissonance and social policing due to a lack of male role models and the persistent framing of these skills as women's work. While recent efforts have attempted to mitigate this stigma by reintegrating these subjects under the STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) umbrella, framing Needlework as Textile Engineering or Home Economics as Nutritional Science, Heinmäe et al. (2025) caution that renaming is insufficient without a fundamental shift in the underlying institutional culture and the perceived status hierarchy of school subjects.

The shift to life skills and sustainability

Recent literature highlights a transition from domestic training towards the development of critical life skills. Modern Home Economics is increasingly recognised for its multidisciplinary approach, encompassing areas such as finance, digital consumer science and healthy lifestyles (Erjavšek, 2021). Similarly, Kokko and Räisänen (2019) and Väänänen and Pöllänen (2021) note that in Finland, craft education has developed into a compulsory subject for all students, characterised by a holistic approach that integrates multi-material practices, cultural preservation, co-creation and participatory learning, while also placing strong emphasis on critical consumerism and sustainable development.

Branlat and Sano (2022) argued that the contemporary curriculum is uniquely positioned to address global sustainability goals by teaching students the ethical management of household resources and the socio-economic value of "equal partnerships" in domestic labour. By reframing housework as a shared responsibility rather than a biological destiny, the subject challenges the traditional "doing gender" narrative (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and replaces it with a framework of collective household agency (Sakuragi et al., 2022). This shift is particularly evident in the integration of Textile Engineering and Nutritional Science, which aligns domestic skills with the rigorous standards of STEAM education, thereby elevating the subject's perceived status within academic hierarchies (Heinmäe et al., 2025).

The societal impact of such curricular reform is most visible in longitudinal studies from regions that have pioneered mandatory participation for all genders. In Japan, for instance, the transition to a compulsory Home Economics model has successfully narrowed the gender gap in weekend "home production," effectively modifying long-term behavioural norms regarding household chores and caregiving (Hara and Rodríguez-Planas, 2025). This suggests that when the hidden curriculum of gendered subject choice is dismantled through inclusive policy, the resulting convergence of skills leads to more equitable social outcomes. Furthermore, Smyth (2025) notes that these reforms contribute to a new domesticity that emphasises financial literacy and environmental stewardship, making the subject a vital conduit for achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) regarding gender equality and responsible consumption (UN Women, 2023; Väänänen and Pöllänen, 2021).

Empowerment and professionalization

The evolution of Home Economics and Needlecraft from domestic accomplishments to formalised academic disciplines represents a complex double-edged sword for female professionalisation. On one hand, the systematic professionalisation of these subjects has carved out legitimate pathways to economic empowerment by pivoting traditional skills into high-growth sectors, such as textile technology, nutritional science and global hospitality management (UN Women, 2023). This shift has allowed women to monetise historically undervalued domestic labour, transforming private sphere knowledge into public sphere expertise. As Heinmäe et al. (2025) observe, the integration of these subjects into the STEAM framework provides women with specialised technical capital that challenges the traditional exclusion of female-coded skills from the digital economy.

However, this professionalisation is perpetually haunted by the status hierarchy of school subjects and the persistent devaluation of labour tied to social reproduction (Apple, 1996; Goodson 2003). According to Folbre (2021), patriarchal systems consistently devalue work linked to care and the home. This ensures that even when a subject becomes a professional field, it still lacks financial and social status. Väänänen and Pöllänen (2021) indirectly echo this concern by showing how, despite formal curricular equality in craft education, cultural associations with femininity continue to influence both the perceived value and social positioning of these disciplines.

Furthermore, gender theory suggests that this professionalisation often operates within the constraints of the *glass walls*—a form of occupational segregation where women are funnelled into "pink-collar" professional roles that mirror domestic duties (OECD, 2023). Smyth (2025) argues that even when these subjects are modernised, they may inadvertently reinforce the "essentialist" belief that women are naturally predisposed to care and service, thereby sustaining the very structures Folbre (2021) identifies as central to capitalism. Consequently, while these disciplines offer genuine routes to autonomy, they remain trapped in a societal care penalty where the closer a profession is to the domestic origins of Home Economics, the less it is financially and symbolically rewarded.

Methodology

This study adopts a multi-dimensional qualitative research design to examine the curriculum history and social construction of Home Economics and Textiles Studies in Malta between 1960 and 2025. This approach is valuable to enhance triangulation and validity. Rather than relying on a single data stream, this approach utilises methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2012) to provide a thick description of the phenomena (Geertz, 1973). This design ensures that the findings are not merely artifacts of one specific method, but are corroborated across different social and contextual layers.

This method also explores the macro (policy/context) and the micro (individual experience) simultaneously. It provides a robust description allowing researchers to understand not just what is happening, but the specific cultural and social layers behind it (Geertz, 1973). A multi-dimensional study allows the researcher to pivot; that is, if interviews reveal an unexpected theme, the researcher can add a "dimension" (like diary entries or visual mapping) to explore that specific thread further. This provides higher adaptability to the field's realities, leading to more grounded and authentic theories (Charmaz, 2014).

Data Collection Dimensions

To ensure a holistic understanding, data were collected through three distinct qualitative dimensions:

Dimension I: Individual Narratives: Life-History narratives were conducted with 14 participants. These in-depth interviews were valuable to reconstruct the subjects' development through their lived professional experiences. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 participants. This dimension captured the subjective lived experiences, motivations and personal meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Dimension II: Contextual Observations: The researcher was engaged in non-participant observations in 10 secondary schools to capture and assess current pedagogical practices, and laboratory facilities.

Dimension III: Structural/Artifact Analysis (Documentary Analysis): An analysis of archival and policy documents/files, including curricula and syllabi, was performed to understand the formal frameworks and "silences"

within the environment (Flick, 2018). The primary sources of the archival research were retrieved from the National Archives of Malta, the Ministry of Education and the University of Malta. This included official reports, government circulars and the private archives of the Home Economics and Needlework Teachers Association (HENTA) and Home Economics in Action (HEiA).

Sampling and data collection

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of perspectives relevant to the research question. According to Goodson and Sikes (2001), purposive sampling is particularly useful when research focuses on the lives of individuals who have good knowledge and experience. The participants of the life-history interviews were key retired players involved in Home Economics and Textiles Studies. They were selected according to their individual experiences in teacher training, teaching and/or administration. Some participants were retired government employees who had very influential roles in the development of the subjects. All the participants in the life-history interviews were females, as no males were directly involved in the historical development of the subject. Snowball sampling proved very effective in reaching participants who were involved in specific periods under study. This type of sampling is an effective technique 'for building up a reasonable-sized sample, especially when used as part of a small-scale research project' (Denscombe, 2007, p. 17-18)

The criteria for the selection of the participants for the semi-structured interviews was that the individuals had to be formerly or presently involved in Home Economics and Textiles Studies. There were male and female participants in the semi-structured interviews. Some had limited teaching experience in a particular field, or were directly involved in events that occurred during a particular historical phase under study. The semi-structured interviews were carried out with teachers and graduates to provide contemporary insights and corroborate historical data. These were also necessary to corroborate the information gathered from the archival research with that from the life history interviews. The sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached—the point at which new data no longer sparks new theoretical insights (Charmaz, 2014).

Data processing and analysis

Transcription and validation

The life-history and the semi-structured interviews were transcribed and underwent respondent validation to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process involves returning data and preliminary interpretations to both groups of participants to verify their accuracy and resonance with the participants' experiences (Birt et al., 2016). This final step ensures descriptive validity, confirming that the raw data is a faithful representation of the interview (Maxwell, 2021).

Trustworthiness and rigor

In qualitative inquiry, trustworthiness and rigor serve as the functional equivalents to validity and reliability in quantitative research, shifting the focus from statistical accuracy to the truth-value and consistency of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rigor is established through a systematic and transparent research process that allows external observers to follow the "audit trail" of the researcher's decision-making (Noble & Smith, 2025). This involves credibility, ensuring the findings accurately represent the participants' perspectives through triangulation and respondent validation; transferability, providing sufficiently "thick" descriptions so that readers can determine the applicability of the findings to other contexts; dependability, maintaining a logical and documented research process; and confirmability, demonstrating that the interpretations are clearly derived from the data rather than researcher bias (Dahal et al., 2024). Ultimately, a rigorous multi-dimensional approach acknowledges the researcher's role as the primary instrument of data collection, utilising reflexivity to critically account for how their own background and positionality may influence the co-construction of knowledge.

Data analysis strategy

The integration of data within this multi-dimensional qualitative study was managed through a rigorous thematic indexing system, which facilitates the synthesis of life-history interviews, semi-structured interviews and archival research. Following the foundational principles of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the indexing process begins with an immersive phase of data familiarisation across all three dimensions to identify recurring patterns and latent meanings. This system acts as a crosswalk that allows for

the mapping of individual life trajectories against broader social and institutional records. As noted by Naeem et al. (2023), maintaining such a systematic approach is vital in multi-method qualitative research to ensure that the transition from raw data to conceptual themes remains transparent and theoretically sound.

The indexing procedure was applied specifically to each data stream to capture both temporal and structural nuances. In the life-history dimension, indexing focuses on the "life-grid" and biographical turning points, drawing on Goodson and Sikes (2001) to track how personal identities are constructed over time. Simultaneously, the semi-structured interviews provide a synchronic layer of data, capturing current participant attitudes and reactions that are indexed according to the study's primary research questions. These personal accounts were then triangulated against the archival dimension, where historical documents and institutional artifacts are indexed to provide the structural scaffolding (Denscombe, 2007) that either corroborates or complicates the lived experiences of the participants. This method specifically allows for the observation of how social roles are performed or done within specific historical constraints, reflecting the conceptual framework of doing gender as proposed by West and Zimmerman (1987).

Ultimately, the thematic indexing system culminates in a process of charting, where data from each dimension are grouped into a unified thematic framework. This allows the researcher to move beyond a fragmented analysis and instead produce the "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) that accounts for the interplay between personal narrative, contemporary perspective and archival fact. By aligning these disparate data sources within a single index, the study achieved a high degree of interpretive rigor, ensuring that the final themes are derived from a holistic synthesis of the social phenomenon, rather than a single, isolated method.

The themes eventually identified were (i) the historical and ideology foundations, (ii) the influence of the strong traditional Maltese values regarding marriage and family, (iii) the 1981 crisis and the struggle for survival, (iv) the path to co-education - transformation and legal equality, and (v) Textiles Studies – an option available only for girls.

Ethical integrity and participant protections

Ethical integrity in this multi-dimensional study was maintained through a rigorous adherence to the principles of autonomy, beneficence and non-maleficence, ensuring the research process is both transparent and respectful (Dahal et al., 2024). Central to this framework is the administration of informed consent. Thus, prior to engagement, participants received comprehensive information sheets detailing the study's objectives, the multi-method nature of the data collection and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Written consent was obtained before any life-history or semi-structured interviews commenced, explicitly affirming the participant's right to withdraw at any stage without prejudice (Arslan, 2025). To protect participant identities, strict confidentiality was enforced through the systematic application of pseudonyms and the redaction of specific biographical markers that could lead to deductive identification in both the interview transcripts and the archival analysis (Noble & Smith, 2025). Regarding data storage, all digital assets—including audio recordings and indexed archival notes—were housed in encrypted, password-protected folders on a secure institutional server in compliance with data protection legislation. Physical documents, such as signed consent forms, were maintained in a locked filing cabinet accessible only to the researcher, with all sensitive identifiers scheduled for destruction following the mandatory retention period (Naeem et al. 2023).

Findings and discussion

The following themes represent the final set identified through the process of data analysis. They provide a structured framework for presenting the findings and form the basis for the subsequent discussion, where their significance is interpreted in relation to the research aims and relevant literature.

Historical and ideological foundations

Historically, the Maltese educational system, influenced heavily by its status as a former British colony, utilised domestic subjects to professionalise domestic roles, often reinforcing a rigid division of labour where girls were trained in Domestic Economy or Housecraft and Needlework to become responsible housewives, while boys were directed toward technical fields, such as Woodwork (Sultana, 1992; Portelli, 1996; 2016). The development of domestic education in Malta was deeply rooted in the ideology of the Catholic Church

and the state's desire to modernise the home through the scientific management of housework. Documentation of domestic education on the islands dates back to the 1920s, then termed 'Domestic Economy' (Portelli, 1996). The subject formed part of the curriculum of female students in the final year of secondary schools (Portelli, 2016).

The establishment of the Housecraft School in Floriana in 1931 marked a significant institutional milestone, focusing on manual tasks such as laundry, cooking and housekeeping to prepare girls for their national duty as devoted wives and mothers (Portelli, 2016). The policy of teaching different subjects to boys and girls was strengthened by the setting up of this school. The organisation of the Housecraft School followed that of the British home-making centres, as it focused mainly on tasks performed by working-class women at home (Yoxall, 1965). The value of teaching the different areas of domestic subjects to female students attending the Housecraft School was clearly articulated by the Director of Education in the 1948-54 annual report:

“The beneficial influence of a good woman both in the home and outside will always remain incalculably greater whatever the conditions or the social sphere in which she moves [...] And to teach the modern girl this art [housecraft], together with the devotion and unselfishness that should go with it, is the objective at which we must aim on the training of girls (Report of the Workings of the Department of Education (RwDE) 1948-54, p. XXVI).”

The creation of a Housecraft School and the teaching of the subject in girls' schools were seen as priorities by the authorities, aimed at addressing the lack of domestic bias in girls' education (RwGD 1930-31). The goal was to draw female students' interest to these subjects, creating a direct link to parents. Authorities even considered it more important for parents to gain this knowledge. The work carried out by the staff at the Housecraft School was expected to improve the quality of life for the Maltese and establish good hygiene practices (RwDE 38-39). All schools were instructed to follow the Housecraft School syllabus 'as far as apparatus, furniture and other circumstances (such as environment) permit' (RwGD 1934-35, p. 52). The establishment of two Housecraft Schools, one in Malta and another on the sister island of Gozo, led to the widespread teaching of domestic subjects in Malta and Gozo (Portelli, 1996).

By 1937, the school changed its focus by extending its services beyond those aimed at primary school children. At the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, Domestic Science rooms were set up in the larger primary schools in order to carry out practical work (RwDE 1948-54). During the 1950s, modifications were made to the Housecraft School courses, namely Cookery, Household Management, Laundry Work and Personal and Domestic Hygiene. This followed the introduction of a new syllabus for the teaching of Housecraft and Domestic Science, including Needlework, in the primary school, which focused more on the practical nature of the subjects (RwDE 1955-56). By 1964, the system was revised and the school visits were only limited to 13- and 14-year old girls who took Housecraft lessons at the primary school. This new system reached out to more girls, especially the older ones, who would be more needed to do housework at home (RwDE 1964).

Critics have since argued that this curriculum was a deliberate attempt to suppress the ambitions of working-class girls and limit their labour market opportunities (Portelli, 1996; Darmanin, 1992). Darmanin argued that the ideology of the education authorities strengthened gender stereotyping by showing that it was important for working class girls to embrace their domestic role, hence fulfilling their 'ideals of femininity' (p.107). Education reports from the mid-20th century explicitly stated that the influence of a good woman in the home was of incalculable value, and training girls in housecraft was a national concern (Portelli, 2016).

Needlework was a prominent subject in the curriculum of Maltese primary schools, typically taught to girls, while boys engaged in subjects such as Drawing, Handwork or Craft. This reflects a broader pattern also evident in the Finnish education system, where materials and techniques were traditionally divided along gender lines, with textile-based activities associated with girls and technical work with boys (Väänänen & Pöllänen, 2021). A comparable distinction was observed in Japan, where boys were directed towards industrial arts, including woodwork and electronics, while girls were assigned subjects such as home economics, encompassing cooking, sewing and childcare (Hara and Rodríguez-Planas, 2025).

The importance of Needlework in girls' education remained constant throughout the years. The education authorities deemed it indispensable for the girls' future roles as mothers and housewives, and important for the well-being of Maltese families, as it promoted thrift, and in some cases gave girls the

opportunity to earn money (Portelli, 2009). Modifications to the subject's syllabus were carried out regularly, constantly focusing on the acquisition of appropriate skills needed in making up simple garments as early as Standard III, for ten and eleven-year-olds (Department of Education File [DEdF], No. 700/49 - Primary School Syllabus 1949-50 and 1950-51). By 1960, Needlework was still a very important subject for girls in the primary schools, and high quality work was attributed to dedicated teachers. By 1961, Knitting, Needlework, Dress-cutting and Housecraft were being taught in primary schools. Almost every primary school was equipped with a sewing machine, a table for cutting-out, an electric iron and an ironing board (RwDE 1962).

The influence of the strong traditional Maltese values regarding marriage and family

While Maltese educational policy in the mid-20th century aimed to strengthen secondary and grammar school provisions for girls, these efforts were frequently undermined by traditional social norms. Despite the rising popularity of 'feminised' professions like teaching and nursing by the late 1950s (RwDE, 1959), many women were discouraged from pursuing education beyond the secondary level. This reluctance was rooted in a dominant cultural ethos that emphasised domestic roles and early family formation, as noted by the Director of Education in his official assessments from 1959 and 1961:

Many girls marry young in Malta and the years (usually few) between leaving school and marriage are regarded as the ideal time for the young woman to lay aside such earnings as immediate employment affords her (RwDE 1959, p.7).

The object of these schools [the Girls' Grammar Schools, in Malta and Gozo] is to prepare girls to take their place as educated Catholic women in modern society. Great importance is attached to the training of character and thus preparing women both for employment and for home making (RwDE 1961, p. 17).

The ideology of the Education Department and that of the Catholic Church on the importance of domestic education for girls to strengthen the role of women in family life benefited the Housecraft/Home Economics and Needlework/Needlecraft community, which included an inspectress, teachers, pupils and parents who considered it useful for their daughters to learn the subjects. The popularity of the subjects continued for many decades until the 1980s, when the Junior Lyceums (similar to the Grammar schools) were established.

From a feminist curriculum perspective, the early Maltese HE curriculum can be interpreted as a mechanism of ideological control, aligning educational content with nationalist and moral imperatives (Apple, 1996; Goodson, 2003). By positioning domestic competence as women's national duty, educational authorities effectively naturalised gendered divisions of labour and limited women's access to broader vocational trajectories. This process resonates with what West and Zimmerman (1987) describe as the "doing of gender" through institutional practices, whereby gender norms are actively produced and sustained through routine social interactions and policy structures.

The 1981 crisis and the struggle for survival

The transition toward a gender-neutral curriculum was a slow process, delayed by traditional Mediterranean cultural factors (Portelli, 2016). A significant turning point occurred in 1981 when the Education Department, in an attempt to provide a similar curriculum for both genders in the newly set up Junior Lyceums, removed Home Economics and Needlecraft from the compulsory list for 11- and 12-year-olds (DEdF, No. 400/72 - Education Officer of Home Economics and Needlework to the Asst. Director of Education, 9 March 1983). At the time, boys were not taught Home Economics or Needlecraft. This move was met with intense lobbying from the Home Economics and Needlework Teachers Association (HENTA) and Education Officer Joyce Pullicino (DEdF, No. 400/72 - Education Officer to Minister of Education, 17 November 1981). They argued that the subjects were vital to the national economy, contributing to diabetes prevention, energy conservation and hygiene (DEdF, No. 400/72 - Education Officer to Minister of Education, 17 November 1981). There was also a significant fear of teacher redundancy, as the removal of the subjects from the lower forms threatened to push specialists out of their field. Due to this contestation, the subjects were reintroduced for girls via a rotation system in 1983, highlighting the subject community's role in defending their "territory" (DEdF, No. 400/72 - Home Economics and Needlework Education Officer to the Minister of Education, 17 November 1981).

This case represents one of the most significant historical instances of grassroots lobbying by a subject's association and Education Officer in the history of the Maltese educational system. By unequivocally contesting the government's directive, the subjects' community demonstrated the power of collective stakeholder agency to disrupt top-down mandates. While authorities

initially argued for a unified curriculum regardless of gender, the subsequent curricular reintroduction of these subjects for female students in 1983—implemented via a rotation system in junior lyceums—serves as a clear example of policy refraction. This process illustrates how the original policy model was halted and fundamentally modified through the objections of stakeholders, ensuring the final implementation accounted for the practical needs of students and the professional security of the educators involved.

The path to Co-education - Transformation and legal equality

In the Maltese context, the trajectory toward gender equity in education was slowed by deeply entrenched traditional and cultural norms characteristic of Catholic Mediterranean societies. While the UK's Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 pioneered the prohibition of gender-exclusive curricula, similar shifts in Malta occurred with a significant cultural lag. Despite the structural reforms of the Maltese Education Act of 1974, a truly gender-free curriculum remained elusive until the introduction of the 1990 National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) Regulations. This landmark legislation mandated universal access to core subjects and elective choices, leading to the 1992 integration of male students into Home Economics within state secondary schools (Portelli, 2016). Although the subsequent expansion of these options to Year 6 students signalled a progressive move toward neutrality, the transition was met with scepticism by some educators—a reaction likely rooted in the subject's historically marginalised status and its persistent cultural coding as a feminine pursuit.

We never thought that our subjects could ever be offered to boys. This was a big success. It was all due to the Education Officer and Subject Coordinators who worked so hard to accomplish all this. It was a big achievement for the country. I had never dreamt that Home Economics could ever be taught to boys! [Kennedia]

By the early 2000s, male participation had grown significantly. By 2013, male candidates accounted for half of all students sitting for the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examination in Home Economics (MATSEC Statistical Reports, 2013). This shift was largely driven by a vocational transformation; the curriculum moved away from a purely family-oriented focus toward a foundation for the hospitality and catering industry (Portelli, 2016). The link to the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS) became a primary motivator for boys, who viewed the subject as a utilitarian "stepping stone" to

professional careers as chefs or hotel managers (Portelli, 2016). This situation was not unique to Malta, as the vocational aspect of Home Economics also attracted male students in other countries, such as Australia, where Pendergast found that students selected the subject for its practical component. Girls perceived it as a means to improve their life skills, while boys aspired for paid work in catering (Pendergast, 2001).

The popularity of the subject in male state secondary schools is evident from the number of students opting for it. For instance, after eight years since Home Economics was introduced in state secondary schools, during the scholastic year 2000-2001, the subject was studied by 895 male students in ten boys' schools around Malta and Gozo (Borg and Fenech, 2001).

The expansion of Home Economics into the boys' church school sector faced a combination of material and perceptual obstacles. While the lack of specialised infrastructure and funding for food laboratories presented tangible difficulties, these were not insurmountable, as evidenced by schools successfully employing a shared-use facility model with Design and Technology departments. The more significant deterrent was institutional gender-coding; school authorities frequently viewed the subject as inherently female-oriented, overlooking its diverse career prospects for boys. This institutional bias was reinforced by a prevailing student discourse that characterised Home Economics as an 'easy' or 'low-ability' subject (Zahra, 1996), a sentiment still pervasive today and which was echoed by a veteran educator in this study who noted the persistent struggle to decouple the discipline from its historical domestic associations.

When Home Economics became available for boys, we experienced a leap in status. However, after nearly 20 years, there are some boys' schools that still consider Home Economics as a Cinderella subject. I have a nephew who is a bright boy and chose the subject in Form I. One day he asked me whether Home Economics was chosen only by the weakest students. He felt uneasy telling others that he studied Home Economics.

This is the situation and we have to face it.

When Home Economics was introduced at ITS, people started appreciating its value, not just its usefulness in everyday life. Often,

parents tell me that they would like their children to choose the subject because it is useful in life. When ITS started, people started looking at the subject from a different perspective. I could see it. [Marigold]

People's perception towards the subject is still focused on the fact that historically it was a girls' subject, and this identity has shaped its content and its pedagogies. While the Maltese Home Economics syllabi at all levels (e.g., MATSEC - SEC 19, 2026) are regularly modernised and designed to be gender-neutral, this formal neutrality contrasts with persistent societal perceptions that continue to frame the subject as feminine.

Guidance and counselling services in schools have historically played a significant role in influencing more female students to opt for the subject than they do for males (Mears and Haynes-Clements, 1983). As it is difficult for some to give a clear definition of the subject, anecdotal evidence indicates that till this day many counsellors remain attached to the traditional view that Home Economics is related to the female domain and is suitable for low-ability students.

As was the case in Britain through the 1980s (Attar, 1990) and in Australia in the 1990s (Pendergast, 2001), in Malta, very few boys usually opt for Home Economics at secondary school to gain qualifications that would lead them to a specific career path other than the ITS courses in hospitality. This is reflected in the number of male candidates sitting for Intermediate and Advanced level examinations in Home Economics and Human Ecology (MATSEC Statistical Reports 2013-2025) which is typically low. In her research on the British situation, Attar (1990) found similar trends in the number of males taking the subject at Advanced level. A male participant in this study made the following comment about his decision to choose Home Economics at Sixth Form:

My former Junior Lyceum [secondary school] mates were really surprised that I chose Home Economics as one of my Advanced level subjects. In previous years, they had really admired those who opted for Home Economics. But now their perception has changed drastically. Home Economics students were no longer looked up to. My friends asked me: "Do you know what you are doing? Do you know that you are narrowing your career options?" I replied that this

was my decision as I wanted to become a Home Economics teacher [Robert].

The low number of males opting for Home Economics at this level was also highlighted by Pendergast (2001) with reference to Australia.

Most Maltese male students of Home Economics were interested in pursuing their studies in catering, while others intended to follow degree courses at University in psychology, social care or education. Since 2001, only eleven male students obtained a Bachelor of Education/Bachelor of Science degree in Home Economics. Three of them were mature students and had previously studied at ITS before reading for a degree in Home Economics. The others had obtained their Advanced level qualifications in the subject and wanted to pursue a career in teaching. A participant who read a B.Ed. (Hons.) degree at University made the following comment:

Since secondary school, I was always determined to become a Home Economics teacher. That was my aim and I wanted to teach boys. My teacher, who taught me in Form I used to encourage me to go to ITS as I was good at the subject. I never dreamt of going to ITS. I did not want to continue my studies there. My wish was to become a Home Economics teacher [David].

Personal observations indicate that male Home Economics teachers at the university level were often driven by a desire to mentor male students, especially when they themselves had studied the subject during their formative secondary years. This targeted interest in teaching boys remained a core motivator until the 2014 rollout of co-education across all Maltese state schools. Following this reform, the focus shifted from overcoming 'gendered enclosures' to managing diverse, mixed-gender cohorts, effectively changing the recruitment and motivational profile of male educators in the field.

One of the male Home Economics graduates described his experience during his two years at Sixth Form as follows:

There were two Home Economics groups following the A level course and there were two boys in each group. My friend, a former secondary schoolmate, was in my group. I always felt like a king among all those girls [laughs] during the Home Economics lessons.

Our teacher tried her best to include us in the discussion of topics more related to females [...] However, I would still have preferred if my friend and I were with the boys of the other group [Robert].

The males studying Home Economics at Advanced level at Sixth Form were of two types; the ones who felt isolated because they were outnumbered by their female counterparts and those who attracted all the attention and blended well with the rest of the group. Robert was one of the latter type of students. His final concluding comment may indicate that, somehow, boys still preferred the presence of other boys during Home Economics lessons.

Several of the participants of this study reflected on their teaching experience. For instance, Robert's experience during teaching practice in a girls' school was a positive one:

I was always very respected by the staff. The main reason was that I was a male Home Economics teacher. To a certain extent, maybe for social reasons, Home Economics is considered a girls' subject [...]. Both the students and the Home Economics teachers [all females] showed me great respect. I was really pampered [Robert].

Despite offering paths to autonomy, these disciplines remain constrained by a societal care penalty (England, 2005). This theory posits that the closer a profession is to its domestic origins, the less it is financially and symbolically rewarded. Consequently, nurturance-based subjects carry lower social status and pecuniary rewards than traditionally male-dominated STEM fields.

In Robert's case, his novelty as a male teacher in an all-girls' school triggered "mother figure" and caring attitudes from female colleagues. While Pendergast (2001) suggests that a male teacher's popularity stems from valued skills rather than appearance, Robert's youth and gender prompted specific behaviours from both staff and students. Ultimately, his effective teaching was so well-received that the Headmaster sought to retain him full-time upon graduation.

Male Home Economics teachers could be 'positive role models' for boys in secondary schools. According to Pendergast (2001, p.48), this could trigger a 'circular legitimization strategy' where more boys would opt to study the subject, thus improving its image and status. This, she argued, could further entice males to choose Home Economics at post-secondary level. Being a good

role model for male students was an issue that was raised by one of the male participants of the study, who was a teacher in a secondary school that catered to students who either failed the 11+ examination or decided not to sit for it:

Students regularly ask me, "But how can we become Home Economics teachers from a secondary school?"

I tell them that if they concentrate on their studies, they will achieve their aim. When I tell them that I also attended a secondary school when I was in Form I, they get encouraged. They see me as a good role model for them [David].

Being a Home Economics teacher in an all-boys' school has an added advantage. Students of both sexes tend to trust Home Economics teachers and many also consider them as friends. This was pointed out by one of the male participants:

Male students are different. Once they realise that you are as good as a female teacher, they start trusting you. They [male students] told me that I was like a father to them, as they could express things much better than with the female teachers. The male perception is different [...] When I am teaching certain topics, such as family, drugs, smoking [...], my male students tend to share a lot of personal experiences. They feel more comfortable with me than with females [Kieran].

The male teacher could be instrumental in influencing the perceptions of parents and students with respect to the careers related to the subject. David described the following situation:

The first time I entered the classroom, the students were really pleased that I was a male Home Economics teacher. Students still believe that Home Economics leads you only to ITS. That is the only thing the students focus on. During the 'option talks', parents are still of the idea that their children can work in a hotel if they choose Home Economics. I always try to help them understand that a career in catering is not the only path that their children can take. Unfortunately, the parents' perception is still much focused on the hospitality industry [David].

Some parents and students are still in the dark about the career prospects related to Home Economics. In Malta, the long-standing tradition that the subject is specifically oriented towards the domestic domain and to females, restricted some career openings. Limited proper promotional activities by the Home Economics community for the various careers related to the subject have contributed to the problem. As seen from the interviews with male respondents, the majority of the male students who study Home Economics choose the subject in order to pursue a career in catering.

From another perspective, having a male Home Economics teacher in an all-girls' school was found to trigger a different reaction:

During the first lesson I had with Form I students, they were surprised that I was going to teach them Home Economics. They thought that I was replacing an absent teacher. So when I told them to write down what they would need for their Home Economics lessons, they were astonished. They thought that men could not teach Home Economics. It was a very big surprise for them that there were male Home Economics teachers too. They were aware that Home Economics was an option for boys, but not that males could specialise in the subject and get a teaching degree [Robert].

Other two male participants compared the perspectives of both female and male students as they perceived them during their teaching practice experience:

The girls had no problem accepting me as a male Home Economics teacher. The boys appreciated it more, as you can do more practical lessons with the boys and they do get more involved. The girls were more relaxed [...] they were a bit shy too. So they kept back from asking any questions [Adam].

When I was teaching girls, I used to feel that the lesson was conducted at a quicker pace than with boys. Girls used to talk more among themselves and I had to raise my voice. The boys are different, as I never needed to raise my voice so much. In fact, the first time I went into a class of boys, the students told me, "Please, Sir, you do not need to raise your voice so much." [Kieran].

The attitudes of boys towards the subject were highlighted in the study conducted by Attar (1990) and Zahra (1996). During her observations, Attar found that British boys tend to show enthusiasm, enjoy Home Economics lessons and gain praise from their teachers more than girls. She noted that 'the most striking feature, absent from description of teaching home economics to girls, is the enjoyment which both teachers and pupils express' (p.133). This account is similar to that of Zahra (1996), who conducted research among Home Economics teachers and students of both sexes in Maltese secondary schools. She found that female teachers preferred to teach boys rather than girls, as boys participated actively and gave them positive feedback about their lessons.

Interaction does not always stem from positive vibes. In the work conducted by Measor (1983) on gender and the curriculum results showed that when boys and girls were offered compulsory Domestic Science and Needlework, the boys were more reluctant to study a 'feminine' subject. As a result, they were disruptive and it was very difficult for the teacher to gain control of the class. The boys' attitudes towards Domestic Science were slightly different from those towards Needlework, as they felt that the former had better career prospects (Measor, 1983; 1984). Attar (1990) attributes this variable engagement to the fact that boys are not socially pressured to view the subject as a service role, unlike their female counterparts.

Textiles Studies – An option available only for girls

While both Home Economics and Textiles Studies were subject to the same top-down mandates for gender neutrality under the 1990 NMC and the 2012 National Curriculum Framework (NCF), the actual implementation or policy refraction of these directives differed significantly between the two disciplines. This discrepancy highlights how the status hierarchy of school subjects is not uniform, but is instead mediated by varying degrees of gender-coding and perceived vocational utility.

As evidenced in the findings, Home Economics was successfully included in the curricula of the majority of boys' church schools by 2014, with resistance often framed as a logistical or structural issue regarding food laboratory costs (Private Correspondence). However, for Textiles Studies, the refraction was more profound. Despite the legal right of boys to opt for the subject, administrative discretion (DCM 71/14) often acted as a gatekeeper, allowing Heads of School to withhold the option if it had not been traditionally offered.

This suggests that while Home Economics was eventually viewed as a practical life skill suitable for both sexes, Textiles Studies remained trapped in a gendered enclosure, perceived strictly as a feminine domestic accomplishment.

The transition of Textiles Studies into a viable option for male students in Malta has been hindered by its historical domestic branding, unlike in Britain, where the shift to Textiles Technology removed much of the gender bias. While the 1990 NMC authorised equal subject choice, Textiles never gained traction in boys' schools. Participants in this study emphasised that highlighting vocational aspects, such as fashion design, and showcasing successful male role models, are critical for recruitment.

"As everybody knows, the best fashion designers are males. So why is it such a problem to offer the subject to boys? We need to do more lobbying. I think that we need to make people more aware of the importance of the subject [Barbara]."

"If Textiles Studies was well promoted, it could compete well with other subject options that attract male students in their choice of subjects. I think it is very important to offer Textiles [Studies] to boys. Many famous designers and good Maltese dress-makers are males, so why can't Maltese boys have the opportunity to study Textiles [Studies]? [Polly]."

This quote highlights a missed opportunity for the subjects' stakeholders. Because the subject was not aggressively rebranded to highlight its technical and high-fashion vocational paths, it remained vulnerable to social policing and identity dissonance among male students, who viewed it as a girls' subject (Portelli 2016).

Unlike Home Economics, Textiles Studies has struggled to transform its gendered image. It remains a largely gender-intensive field of study that is strongly associated with, and often shaped by, one gender, in this case, females—typically reflected in participation patterns, societal expectations, and cultural meanings attached to the subject. It failed to attract male students despite its potential links to fashion design. Statistics show that between 2001 and 2010, no male candidates sat for the SEC examination in Textiles and Design. It was only after 2013 that a few males registered for the subject at the SEC level, a trend that improved slightly after the introduction of Fashion and

Textiles as a vocational subject in 2019 and the phasing out of Textiles and Design (MATSEC Statistical Reports 2013-2025). The rise in male enrollment can also be attributed to the transition of state schools to a co-educational model, which facilitated a wider choice of subjects in Year 9. When the 'new' Fashion and Textiles vocational subject was introduced, a revamped syllabus was designed to cater for both genders (MATSEC – SEC 44 Syllabus, 2026). Despite this, the subject still struggles to attract male students.

Ultimately, the refraction of policy in boys' schools was more severe for Textiles Studies because it lacked the perceived utility that helped Home Economics cross the gender divide. The lack of male role models created a self-sustaining cycle of unavailability. Consequently, even as the NCF technically removed gender discrimination, the institutional gender-coding of Textiles remained so potent that it effectively neutralised the policy's intent, leaving the subject as one of the few remaining bastions of gender-segregated education in the Maltese state and church sectors.

Conclusion

The trajectory of Home Economics in Malta illustrates a complex process of transformation, moving from its origins as a mechanism of domestic socialisation to its contemporary positioning as a multidisciplinary and vocationally relevant field. Nevertheless, this study demonstrates that while structural and legislative reforms have significantly reduced explicit gender discrimination, the subject continues to be shaped by enduring cultural perceptions that associate it predominantly with femininity.

As Pendergast (2001) argues, Home Economics has historically functioned as a “site of gendered enclosure,” reinforcing socially constructed roles and limiting participation across gender lines. Although the Maltese context has witnessed important shifts, particularly through curriculum reform and increased male participation, these changes have not fully displaced the symbolic and cultural meanings attached to the subject. The persistence of such perceptions reflects a broader disjunction between policy and practice, where formal equality does not necessarily translate into lived inclusivity. Evidence from Japan further suggests that curricular reform alone may not fundamentally alter gender attitudes; rather, increased male participation in domestic practices has been linked more to the acquisition of practical skills than to shifts in beliefs about gender roles (Hara and Rodríguez-Planas, 2025).

At the same time, the evolving scope of the discipline aligns with international perspectives that position Home Economics as central to addressing contemporary global challenges. The International Federation for Home Economics (2008) highlights the subject's role in fostering critical life skills, while more recent conceptualisations, such as Home Economics 5.0 advanced by Sue McGregor (2025), emphasise its relevance within the context of sustainability, digital transformation and ethical decision-making. These developments emphasise the subject's potential to transcend its historical limitations and contribute meaningfully to future-oriented education.

However, the findings of this study suggest that achieving genuine gender inclusivity requires more than curricular modernisation or policy intervention. It necessitates a sustained effort to challenge deeply embedded social norms, reframe the epistemological foundations of the subject, and enhance its perceived status within the educational hierarchy. Without such shifts, Home Economics risks remaining constrained by what Pendergast (2012) describes as the legacy of its gendered past, despite its evolving content and purpose.

In conclusion, the future of Home Economics in Malta depends on its ability to move beyond symbolic reform towards substantive cultural change. By actively unpicking its historical associations with gender and promoting a more inclusive and dynamic identity, the subject can fully realise its potential as a powerful enabler of life skills, social equity and resilience in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

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