

## 9 Towards contextual understanding of gender

### Student teachers' views on home economics education and gender in Ghana and Finland

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The diversity among students is to be recognised and respected, so gender needs to be taken into consideration (Lahelma, 2011). Through culturally responsive education (Gay, 2013), the contextual and relational aspects of learning can be emphasised, and, thus, gender can be acknowledged. The focus of this chapter is on the contextual understanding of gender in home economics education as it is perceived by university teacher students at the University of Helsinki, Finland, and the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. Finland is characterised by a seemingly gender-neutral approach to home economics education, whereas Ghana has a feminised approach. Following the researchers' commitment as teacher educators to precipitate change and transformation in education, this empirical analysis draws on group discussions with future home economics teachers at two universities in these countries.

Home economics and its multiple content areas (e.g. food and nutrition, consumer issues, family studies, sustainable living) are understood and emphasised in different contexts in various ways (McGregor, 2011; Wahlen, Posti-Ahokas, & Collins, 2009). In the school subject of home economics, gender may be more visible and determinative of pupils' participation and roles than in other subjects. In both Ghana and Finland, home economics has a relatively strong position at different levels of education. In both contexts, gender has been defined as a critical yet overlooked issue in home economics education (Amu & Edjah, forthcoming Anttila, Leskinen, Posti-Ahokas, & Janhonen-Abbruquah, 2015). In Ghana, gender inequality is recognised as a critical societal problem and discussed in relation to education policy, including setting targets for equal access and enrolment for male and female students. In addition, demand to meet the Millennium Development Goals focused on eliminating gender discrimination and inequalities in access and achievement at all levels of education requires attention to the subject of home economics, as it is a heavily female-dominated field of study across the educational system. In Finland, education policies and the national

curriculum increasingly emphasise the importance of replacing the prevailing gender-neutral rhetoric of current education policies and practices with gender awareness to advance gender equality (FNBE, 2014). Finnish home economics education, particularly at the basic education level, has been widely considered gender neutral (Turkki, 2011). However, the growing gender awareness promoted through research, policy and curricula has resulted in an increasing focus among home economists on gender-related problems within their field (Amu & Edjah, forthcoming; Anttila et al., 2015; Turkki, 2011).

Defined as an academic discipline and curriculum area connected to everyday living in households and wider societal arenas (International Federation for Home Economics (IFHE), 2008), home economics (education) is in a good position to capture, discuss and advance gender-related issues from multiple perspectives and at different levels, from individual perspectives to wider policy frameworks. However, gender is difficult to address as it runs through structures, cultures and subjectivities, and the concept of gender has different meanings for different people (Lahelma, 2011, 2014). Therefore, challenging the normative, dichotomised perspectives on gender is simultaneously one of the most critical tasks and the greatest opportunities for home economists working in different countries (Pipping-Ekström & Hjälmeskog, 2006; Thompson, 1986).

Culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010, 2013) can act as the pedagogical practice of gender awareness, as it aims to achieve meaningful learning for all. Learners are addressed in a comprehensive way and are multi-dimensionally engaged in learning activities. Learning aims for change and freedom and is both transformative and emancipatory (Gay, 2013, p. 52). Attention to gender is needed for teaching to become truly transformative and emancipatory. In home economics education, whether seen as a feminine subject as in Ghana or as a gender-neutral subject as in Finland, gender plays a critical role. Through this chapter, the authors argue for the importance of analysing the various contextual, multi-dimensional understandings of gender and their influence on practices in home economics education and on the image of the profession. Drawing from online and focus group discussions of home economics university students facilitated by the authors in 2013 and 2014, this research analyses home economics student teachers' perceptions of gender in Finland and Ghana. The aim is to deepen understanding of the influence of gender on attitudes, practices and policies in home economics education. This understanding is one of the ways to move towards cultural responsiveness in education, which contributes to more equal and just societies.

Research on students' voices in higher education development (e.g. Seale, 2010) has been reported in home economics education by Turkki (2005), who demonstrates the richness of perspectives provided by home economics student teachers on improving teacher education and the image of the home economics profession. Additionally, McGregor (2011) has emphasised the

1 importance of pre-professional socialisation in the future of home economics.  
2 This study is linked to the regular learning activities at two universities, creat-  
3 ing a space to co-construct understanding of gender. For teacher educators,  
4 this research provides an opportunity to listen to students' voices, which can  
5 facilitate responding to the needs and expectations of student teachers. The  
6 study is connected to the activities of the North–South–South network:  
7 'Culturally responsive education' and is part of on-going research-based  
8 development of home economics teacher education in Ghana (e.g. Amu &  
9 Edjah, forthcoming; Edjah & Amu, 2012) and Finland (Janhonen-Abuquah,  
10 Posti-Ahokas, Palojoiki & Lehtomäki, 2014; Posti-Ahokas, Janhonen-Abuquah,  
11 & Johnson Longfor, 2015).

### 14 Home economics education and gender equality

15 Gender has been an integral part of the development of the home economics  
16 field throughout its 120-year history. Thompson (1986) contends that home  
17 economics, though a female-defined discipline, was never intended to be for  
18 women only. She applies a metaphorical model with classical roots to describe  
19 the lived space where the public Hermean sphere, named after the Greek god  
20 of communication, is visible and masculine, and the Hestian world, named  
21 after the Greek goddess of the hearth and home, is private, invisible and fem-  
22 inine (Thompson, 1986). The domains are not mirror images of one another  
23 but exist in relation to each other while remaining distinctive. They are com-  
24 plementary and interdependent. According to Thompson (1986), understand-  
25 ing the essence of home economics requires a shift from a male-defined  
26 Hermean mind-set to a female-defined Hestian mind-set. This perceptual  
27 shift, claims Thompson (1986), brings into focus a holistic reality and raises  
28 thinking beyond gender to more complex levels of social and intellectual  
29 organisation. Thompson's (1986) metaphor helps understanding of the com-  
30 plementary male and female mind-sets and allows the viewing of the two  
31 simultaneously existing spheres as less defined by biological sex, permitting  
32 individuals to shift from one world to another in a more flexible manner.

33 Thompson (1986) demands that home economics be recognised for its  
34 potential to contribute to reducing the gender-role stereotyping of necessary  
35 everyday tasks. In more recent home economics research, the gender per-  
36 spective is typically present in investigations of the division of household  
37 work and parenting (e.g. Aalto, 2014; Braun, Lewin-Epstein, Stier, & Baum-  
38 gärtner, 2008; Lewin-Epstein, Stier, & Braun, 2006). However, the under-  
39 lying structures influencing the division of work and other gender-related  
40 phenomena in everyday life have received less research attention.

41 Some recent research on home economics education has focused on the  
42 gender perspective and contributed to the analysis of the influence of gender  
43 on education practices. In a study on the home economics teaching profes-  
44 sion in Australia, Pendergast (2001) analyses home economics teachers as rep-  
45 resentatives of a female-dominated profession and the stereotypes attached to

them. She argues that the stereotypes do not correspond with teachers' identities, and, thus, it is essential to deconstruct these stereotypical views to revive the profession (Pendergast, 2001). Petterson's study (2007) on Swedish home economics education describes the various imaginative ways students perform gender in home economics classes and thereby re-negotiate their biological sex and change the gender order in various contexts and situations. According to Petterson (2007), home economics classes are characterised by a strong female genderisation combined with striving for gender equality. Anttila et al. (2015) study the performance of gender and agency in Finnish home economics textbook illustrations and conclude that home economics textbook images reflect traditional, heteronormative gender positions and styles. The agency portrayed in home economics settings is strongly gendered and performed within predetermined gender categories: for example, picturing cooking males as chefs and women as housewives.

Research in two African contexts – Tanzania (Stambach, 2000) and Ghana (Amu & Edjah, forthcoming) – analyses students' perceptions of home economics education in secondary-level education and discusses the prevailing attitudes towards home economics as a subject characterised by strong gendered assumptions. These studies depict how home economics operates between traditional gender roles and the ideals of changing contemporary society in which a more flexible performance of gender is allowed and gender equality is enhanced.

In this chapter, gender equality is approached from the perspective of creating equal empowerment and enabling conditions. The importance of practical and art subjects in providing spaces to advance gender equality within and through education is emphasised (Berg et al., 2011; Turkki, 2009).

### **Current issues related to gender and home economics education in Ghana**

In the Ghanaian education system, pupils are introduced to aspects of home economics at the primary level. Home economics is introduced as a course at the basic level in junior high school (ages 12–15). In the first year of junior high school, all students are exposed to a compulsory subject called basic design and technology, which is a combination of home economics, visual arts and pre-technical skills. All students, regardless of gender, are introduced to these three areas and informed before selecting to continue in one of these three areas in their second and final years of junior high school education.

At the senior secondary-school level (ages 16–18) in Ghana, home economics is an elective course. At this level, the course consists of three subjects: food and nutrition, clothing and textiles and management in living. The main aim is to equip students with basic life and employment skills, making the course both useful and gainful. Students of home economics have the option of specialising in either food and nutrition or clothing and textiles. The home economics course is not offered in all senior high schools in

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1 Ghana. Out of 562 senior high schools in Ghana, a total of 67 are single-sex,  
2 with 43 for females while the remaining 24 are for males (Ghana Education  
3 Service, 2015). Male students in these single-sex schools do not have access  
4 to home economics programmes of study. This set-up deprives a large  
5 number of male students from acquiring knowledge in home economics that  
6 could help them decide whether it is of interest to them. Similarly, in female  
7 single-sex schools, technical courses are not offered, depriving female students  
8 of access to knowledge in technical programmes at the senior high-school  
9 level. These divisions are a subtle way of reinforcing gender-stereotyped roles,  
10 which are deeply rooted in Ghanaian culture.

11 Upon completion of senior high school, students have options for further  
12 study in education colleges, nurses' training colleges, polytechnic institutes  
13 and universities. Students who wish to further their studies at universities are  
14 given the opportunity to continue specialising in either food and nutrition or  
15 clothing and textiles, with resource management as a core component. Of the  
16 eight public universities in Ghana, four offer home economics education.

17 In Ghana, home economics as an academic programme is female domi-  
18 nated, with males accounting for less than 5 per cent of enrolment  
19 (Neequaye, Darkwa, & Amu, 2014). Home economics programmes in  
20 schools at all levels are dominated by female students, and the field is seen in  
21 many countries as a professional field for women, as Saleem (1998) points  
22 out. The female-dominated nature of home economics in Ghana can be  
23 traced to the way and manner in which the programme was introduced into  
24 the formal education system. As noted by Amu, Offei-Ansah and Amissah  
25 (forthcoming), from the very beginning, the content and scope of home eco-  
26 nomics in Ghana were limited to traditional feminine roles, and boys were  
27 discouraged from performing these perceived female roles. As girls were  
28 offered the home economics course, boys took other courses, such as agricul-  
29 ture, and this gendered pattern has persisted in the programme to date. In a  
30 study of 290,000 junior high school applicants to senior high schools in  
31 Ghana, Ajayi and Buessing (2013) find that 1 of every 4 girls selected home  
32 economics as their first choice, compared to 2 of every 100 boys. Ajayi and  
33 Buessing (2014) also find that male students are more likely to choose agricul-  
34 tural science, general science, business and subjects which they believe can  
35 lead to the traditionally socialised gender-stereotyped roles.

36 In the Ghanaian context, gender inequality is seen as fuelled by cultural  
37 attitudes and values present in the society. Ghanaian society is a clear mirror  
38 of most African communities' prescriptions for appropriate male and female  
39 roles (Ampofo, 2001). The cultural construction of masculinity and feminin-  
40 ity in Ghanaian society is founded on a belief in fundamental biological dis-  
41 tinctions between male and female human natures and corresponding  
42 behavioural prescriptions typically expressed in societal norms and values  
43 (Abu, 1991; Adinkrah, 2012; Nukunya, 2003). Household tasks are often  
44 gender stereotyped, which encourages the disparities between gender  
45 enrolments in different subjects. In Ghana, distinguishing male and female

characteristics are inculcated and absorbed from early childhood (Amoah, 1991; Nukunya, 2003). Akotia and Anum (2012) explain that these differentiated socialisation paths for boys and girls have impacts on their gender role perceptions in adulthood and influence their programme and career choices as they transition from childhood.

### **Current issues in Finnish home economics education**

In Finland, home economics is taught as a compulsory subject for all seventh-grade students (age 13) in basic education. In the eighth and ninth grades (ages 14 and 15), home economics is one of the most popular optional subjects. More recently, home economics has been introduced at the elementary-school level and is taught in some general upper-secondary schools (Venäläinen, 2015). At the secondary-school level, home economics is taught mainly in vocational upper-secondary schools that have home economics-related training programmes in catering, hospitality services and domestic services. In universities, home economics science can be studied as a major at the bachelor's, master's and doctoral levels.

In basic education, the main objective of home economics education is to develop pupils' skills in cooperation, information acquisition and the practical work necessary to manage daily living. Topics taught include family and living together, nutrition and food culture, the consumer and changing society and the home and the environment. The aim of the subject is to teach general life skills for personal growth and development (Finnish National Board of Education, 2004).

Promoting gender equality is one of the goals of home economics education (FNBE, 2004). However, a recent national assessment of home economics learning outcomes (Venäläinen, 2015) identifies significant differences in boys and girls' learning outcomes. Similarly, Anttila et al. (2015) warns of the risk of taking for granted the expected promotion of gender equality by the common home economics education for boys and girls. Given that the general curriculum for basic education (FNBE, 2014) to be implemented in 2016 encourages the enabling of individual learning paths free from predominant gender positions, it is essential to consider how gender is reconstructed and discussed in home economics teacher education.

Gender has been recognised as an overlooked issue in Finnish teacher education that should be given more attention if gender equality is to be taken seriously. To illustrate the controversies in the Finnish debate around gender and education, Lahelma (2011) gives examples of teachers and teacher educators who suggest that gender is not a problem in schools but, in the same breath, express concerns about poor achievement among boys. Therefore, a more gender-aware approach is needed to advance gender equality in seemingly gender-neutral basic education in Finland (Lahelma, 2011, 2014).

## Study of Finnish and Ghanaian home economics student teachers' views of gender

This study applies critical, student-centred approaches to education research. Research on students' voices in higher education (Lehtomäki, Moate & Posti-Ahokas, 2015; McLeod, 2011; Seale, 2010) foregrounds students' perspectives to inform development oriented towards transformation and change in education. Connecting this study with the regular practices of home economics teacher education and the development of university degree requirements at both participating universities are strategies supporting the research-based development of home economics education at the university level. Additionally, the study was a shared dialogic learning process across the two countries, benefitting from the North–South–South network and especially the student and staff mobility, which permitted data collection and time for joint writing.

Data were collected from home economics student teachers who will enter the teaching field. Exploring their ideas can prompt deliberation about their practices in their future profession. Home economics student teachers' views of gender in home economics education were captured in students' online and focus group discussions at the University of Helsinki, Finland, and the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. In Finland, data collection was conducted through an optional master's-level course on gender and home economics taught by one of the authors of this chapter in the autumn of 2013. Sixteen students (2 male, 14 female)<sup>1</sup> participated in the course and the data collection of the study. The analysed data were drawn from students' online discussions in the electronic learning platform used in the course. Throughout the course, students were asked to discuss the role of home economics in advancing gender equality, focusing on the following questions:

- Is promotion of gender equality an implicit assumption in home economics education?
- Are traditional gender roles automatically or unconsciously reproduced?
- What is education in gender equality like in the practice of home economics education?

The Finnish data consist of 18 written contributions ranging from 40 to 250 words. Students were free either to start their own discussion or to react to previous contributions. In the end, the on-line discussion had 8 separate chains which each included 1–4 contributions. While some contributions reflected on the course readings, others were reflective of personal experiences and opinions, portraying a variety of perspectives and different levels of theorising.

The encouraging experience and the thought-provoking contents of the online discussion motivated a discussion organised around similar themes at the Ghanaian partner, the University in Cape Coast. Two focus group discussions were carried out in March 2014 with 16 third- and final-year bachelor

students, of whom 2 were male and 14 female.<sup>2</sup> These discussions were facilitated by two university lecturers in home economics, and each lasted for approximately 1 hour 30 minutes. The questions presented to the students participating in the discussions were:

- What do you see as the role of home economics education in promoting or advancing gender equality?
- Are there practices that unconsciously reproduce traditional gender roles? In secondary education? At the university level?
- How can home economics teachers and educators advance gender equality? Please give examples of practices of education for gender equality in home economics. In secondary education? At the university level?

The discussions were recorded and transcribed by a research assistant. The analysed data consist of 32 single-spaced pages of transcripts. The Ghanaian data differ from the Finnish dataset as the focus group discussions in Ghana were not part of formal learning activities. This resulted in students discussing the topics based on their own experience and their education in general. Gender is not a distinctive topic in the bachelor's-degree programme in home economics offered at the University of Cape Coast.

At both universities, participating students signed a written consent form agreeing to the use of their written or spoken views for research purposes. In the following results section, students' anonymity is protected by referring to individual students by numbers and their biological sex. The selected direct quotations from the Finnish data used in the article were translated into English from the online discussion conducted in Finnish. The two data sets were subjected separately to qualitative content analysis (Silverman, 2006; Wolff, 2007). Preliminary themes were identified in the data. The four researchers collaboratively performed the steps of content analysis. They discussed the themes, categories and alternative ways of analysing the data, both face to face and in online discussions. The research findings are jointly written.

## Findings

### *Ghana: overcoming structural and cultural constraints on gender equality*

It is evident in the discussions of the Ghanaian home economics students that the educational structure itself provides fertile grounds and foundations for gender inequality. In the second year in junior high school (age 13), pupils begin to separate and study in depth the subjects they have been socialised to believe are appropriate for certain genders. For example, boys at the junior high school level are more likely to choose pre-technical skills, and girls are most likely to select home economics, while the visual arts are likely to be



1 chosen by both genders. Psychologically, boys do not believe that they have  
2 equal access to home economics, as they have been brought up to believe  
3 that the subject involves mostly female-dominated activities. Girls, in con-  
4 trast, are oriented to engage less in tasks that involve a lot of physical strength.  
5 Consequently, they tend to select home economics for the remaining two  
6 years of study as it involves the use of little physical strength in most practical  
7 activities, such as cooking, laundry and sewing, compared to pre-technical  
8 skills. In this way, learners align themselves to the beliefs of society, perpetu-  
9 ating existing inequalities.

10 The name of the programme was also considered to be inimical to male  
11 participation. Participants believed that a name change could bring more men  
12 into the programme. This perception is voiced by female student 5:

13  
14 the name 'home economics' makes people turn their minds to [the]  
15 home.... Since traditionally, Ghanaian men think work in the home is  
16 for women, they do not want to be associated with a subject that teaches  
17 issues of the home.  
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19 This finding is in agreement with that of Firebaugh (1980) in North America.

20 Regarding the cultural context of education, female student 3 in the first  
21 group states that 'our culture is such that, in the house, most of the domestic  
22 activities are done by the females, so children grow up with that perception'.  
23 In other words, as pupils begin learning lessons that have a direct relationship  
24 to the home, the general thinking is that this content (subject) is for females.  
25 Consequently, learners make choices corresponding with their mind-set  
26 moulded by society. The agents of socialisation ensure that social norms,  
27 values and beliefs are inculcated through socialisation and that individuals  
28 imbibe them early in childhood. Helgeson (2009) suggests that theories about  
29 gender-role socialisation indicate that different people and objects in chil-  
30 dren's environment provide rewards and models that shape children's  
31 behaviour to fit the gender role norms in their particular society. Various  
32 agents in children's environment, including parents, peers, teachers and the  
33 media, influence children's gender role attitudes. These socialisation agents  
34 usually enforce what is gender-appropriate behaviour through the use of  
35 rewards, sanctions and punishments (Nukunya, 2003). In the focus group dis-  
36 cussions, these agents were identified as behaving in ways that advance gender  
37 inequality. Male participant 1 states that: "Most parents, when their children  
38 are selecting home economics as a course to read at the secondary level, dis-  
39 courage the males from selecting that course as they believe it's for females."

40 Teachers, who one might think should push for more equality, also tend  
41 to act in ways that reduce the opportunities male learners have to study home  
42 economics. Some teachers who male respondents have experienced or come  
43 into contact with suggested that home economics is a female-oriented curric-  
44 ulum. The male facilitator of this discussion shared his own experience when,  
45 in their first contact, his secondary school teacher said, "This course is for

women'.... Then the teacher sees a guy and remarks 'Oh! What are you doing here?'" This report indicates a subconscious imprint made in the mind of the male student that, regardless of his interest, he does not have the right to study home economics. Male participants 1 and 2 in the second group both identified with this experience shared by the facilitator and added that it is not always explicitly evident, but even the subtle comments made and attitudes revealed by both teachers and learners regarding males studying home economics lay bare the gender inequalities that exist within the educational environment. Amu and Edjah (forthcoming) suggest that some parents and teachers discourage males from studying home economics and often express displeasure at such attempts by their male children. Sometimes, male students do not have access to certain options even within the home economics programme. These societal perceptions about home economics have made it unattractive to male students and affected the attitudes of male students who enrol in the programme. Male participant 2 shares his experience:

In the school where I had my internship, there was this guy who wanted to read home economics (food and nutrition option) but was forced to do the clothing and textiles option instead.... He was always out of class during clothing and textiles lessons.

The issue of student achievement tied to various subject areas also came up during the discussion. Participants raised the issue of teachers trying to influence pupils with good general performance to further their studies in any area other than home economics or vocational studies. The entry requirements for home economics programmes at various secondary schools are generally lower than those for other subjects, such as science, business and general arts. This discourages students of both genders who perform well and are interested in home economics, as the impression created by the differences in the entry requirements is that it is a subject for low-performing learners. This also has implications for gender enrolment in home economics in Ghana. Even though both genders are affected, female students are more subtly encouraged to enrol in the programme than males. This is because, in Ghana, high-achieving students are less likely to select gender-stereotyped programmes, such as home economics (Ajayi & Buessing, 2014). Ajayi and Buessing (2014) note that home economics is more popular among girls from deprived areas of Ghana who are more likely to achieve less (academically) than boys from urban areas who are more likely to attain higher academic achievement, especially at the basic level. In Ghana, girls growing up in rural areas with a strong gender bias against females might be discouraged from attending school and consequently have lower academic achievement or tend to select traditionally female-dominated programmes, such as home economics.

## Suggested need for content changes

The most frequently highlighted activities of home economics education in Ghana are cooking and sewing. This tendency reinforces the narrow perception that it is a course that deals solely with cooking and sewing:

I think home economics is seen here in Ghana as a female course. In the past, it was introduced as a course for sewing and cooking, and it was only for women. This has not changed much. It has to be changed; without that, it will still be for only females.

(Female student 7)

But if you look at the course itself, it is a course that is supposed to be viewed as a life-oriented course for both boys and girls. So if the course is structured like that and made compulsory at the basic level, then the inequality that exists in enrolment may decrease.

(Female student 4)

The students suggested that the three main areas should be organised into one course with major components so that both boys and girls could benefit and develop equal interest in the course. Also, the science background and components within the home economics subject should be emphasised in the basic-level content.

Based on students' views, the cultural values of Ghanaian society should also be re-defined, so people gain an understanding that domestic activities are for both genders, not only females. This view should be consciously emphasised in the socialisation of children so that, as they grow up, they understand that they need home economics knowledge to work in the home as individuals. For this to happen, parents holding traditional concepts of domestic roles as a female domain need some form of re-orientation.

Participants also suggested that teachers should give priority to males in home economics classes and not overtly or covertly discriminate against males through actions or comments. As Agyare-Kwabi (2013) notes, Ghana has recently given much attention to gender parity in school enrolment, an agenda largely driven by the desire to meet the second and third Millennium Development Goals which focus on eliminating gender discrimination and inequalities in educational access and achievement at all levels. Home economics, therefore, stands as an appropriate programme to contribute to the realisation of this goal.

## Finland: from gender neutrality to responsive gender awareness

In the online discussion conducted during the course on gender and home economics at the University of Helsinki, student teachers started by discussing the seemingly gender-neutral context of Finnish home-economics education

at the basic level. Students reflected on the fact that home economics education is a compulsory subject for both boys and girls. They assumed that, in Finland, gender equality is taken as a given.

Home economics education has not been divided separately into women and men's chores, but home economics is for everyone.

(Female student 8, male student 2)

Since home economics education has been a common subject for both boys and girls since the beginning of comprehensive school reform, this must have been taken as a major gesture for gender equality.

(Female student 5)

Gender equality is a vast and undefined concept. It is difficult to get hold of it as the basic assumption is that in Finland, gender equality exists.

(Female student 6)

Finland is seen as a country in which gender equality has been achieved (Lahelma, 2011). However, 'genderless gender' (Ronkainen, 2001) is created when mute or hidden gendering and sexualisation converge with the gender-neutral rhetoric of the individual self. Gender neutrality has been understood as gender equality and means that talking about gender is avoided; accordingly, the impacts of gender are muted (Lahelma, 2011). For example, students in this study commented that teaching should be the same for all learners:

In my opinion and based on my own experience, contemporary home economics education promotes gender equality only if the learner her/himself is open to receiving information. Gender equality education is evident in home economics teaching: all of my pupils carry out exactly the same tasks – everyone according to her or his skills.

(Female student 1)

Changes in society have influenced the gender equality discussion over time (Holli, Magnusson, & Rönblom, 2005). The historical transition from an agricultural society to contemporary society has diminished the importance of dividing household chores based on biological sex:

I think that young fathers have been exemplary in combining child and household care and performing it together with mothers.

(Female student 1)

Men are more and more taking part in household activities, and many enjoy food preparation at least as a hobby.

(Female student 1)

1 Our field has long been a 'women's area'. The world has really changed.  
2 Gender has been a bit like a taboo. These things were not questioned or  
3 pondered this way before.

(Female student 2)

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6 Even though society has changed, students gave examples of how home eco-  
7 nomics education still re-creates normative gender roles:

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9 Classes were about cooking. Work division was done equally. Although  
10 everyone was cooking, girls were the ones who were setting the table  
11 and putting the kitchen in order in the end. It was also obvious on the  
12 teacher's part that she required tidying up and cleaning chores more from  
13 the girls, whereas boys had more freedom to act as they wished. The  
14 teacher's attitude was that boys need to be understood as they are boys,  
15 and girls ought to be neat.

(Male student 2)

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18 As in Finland gender equality is seen as a platitude, I believe that, at the  
19 same time, it reinforces and re-creates normative gender roles.

(Female student 6)

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22 Gender equality was seen from the female orientation, and home economics  
23 was reasoned to be a female-dominated area:

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25 The focus has been on women, and males have not been seen as active  
26 agents within the home. Thus, gender has been looked at from the  
27 female point of view.

(Male student 1)

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29  
30 Lahelma (2011) confirms student teachers' beliefs, stating that the theoretical  
31 and empirical results of recent gender research in education have not been  
32 included in mainstream teacher education. Lahelma (2011) further claims that  
33 it is possible for student teachers to graduate without learning about the  
34 requirements set by the Act on Equality Between Women and Men  
35 (1986/2005) or what these requirements mean in the processes and practices  
36 of schools. Gender has been – and still seems to be – the blind spot in teacher  
37 education (Lahelma, 2011).

### 38 39 **Suggestions for increasing gender awareness**

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41 Students' online discussion generated valuable ideas on how to move from  
42 gender neutrality towards home economics education that is increasingly  
43 gender aware and advances gender equality in a responsive way. Student  
44 teachers suggested that the teaching of home economics should be diversified  
45 based on learners' individual interests:

Gender equality in home economics classes means that different personalities and individuals are taken into consideration. Everyone should be given a chance and stimulus to work with and take part in class activities.

(Female student 2)

I observed a seventh-grade home economics class. The teacher supported her pupils individually no matter their sex. One boy was good at cooking. His interest was in food, colours and food-related themes. The teacher recognised the boy's interest and enabled his creative work. She gave him more hints to work with, showed him books for extra reading and discussed with and encouraged the boy to create a table setting that pleased him. This type of teaching is needed more: arousing one's interest and making use of it in teaching.

(Female student 3)

Student teachers recognised the need to change the content of home economics teaching to promote gender equality:

One of my supervisors in teaching practise criticised my choice of a dish for being too girlish even though the learners were men. Since then I've been wondering whether recipes are gendered as well. I think this is about individual preferences and not about differences defined by gender. Someone likes detailed decorations; another, rougher baking.

(Female student 4)

It is important to understand home economics as something else other than cooking and cleaning. Individuals' roles in society have to be emphasised as well. Then home economics can be seen to promote gender equality as then, the field is not restricted only to the domestic sphere. This does not mean that the everyday life in the home is not important, to the contrary.

(Male student 1)

Some students found it difficult to define the concept of equality and argued that gender is not always thought of as a factor contributing to inequality:

The concept of equality is a disturbingly vast concept. To my understanding, it has been connected lately with immigrants and pupils with different cultural backgrounds.

(Female student 5)

This difficulty in recognising the importance of gender may be due to the gender-neutral rhetoric within the education system at all levels. The forthcoming basic education curriculum for home economics education in Finland (FNBE, 2014) calls for gender equality but does not define it clearly.

1 Therefore, the authors strongly call for conducting more content-related  
2 studies on gender equality in teacher education to increase future teachers'  
3 understanding of issues related to gender. Lahelma (2011, p. 11) argues that  
4 making visible the gendered inequalities built into teaching and learning prac-  
5 tices helps student teachers see the same patterns in society, including in their  
6 own lives and partnerships. Therefore, gender awareness is not a personal  
7 characteristic that a teacher either has or does not have; rather, through theo-  
8 retical knowledge, it can be learned and then applied to identify and under-  
9 stand gender and (in)equality. This goal should be part of pedagogical training  
10 (Lahelma, 2011).

11 Discussing experiences of introducing gender into Finnish teacher educa-  
12 tion since the 1980s, Lahelma (2011) and Vidén and Naskali (2010) describe  
13 their feelings of happiness when students' awareness of gender is awakened.  
14 After the courses, the general feeling has been that this knowledge should be  
15 obligatory for every teacher (Lahelma, 2011; Vidén & Naskali, 2010). Sim-  
16 ilarly, a student participating in the course in which the online discussion  
17 took place states that 'this course has surely opened my eyes in many ways!'  
18 (female student 9). Several students recognised deficiencies in the current  
19 content of Finnish home economics teacher education:

20  
21 The perspective of gender does not even come to mind as it has not been  
22 included in our studies.

23 (Female student 8)

24  
25 The gender theme is kind of artificially kept in the courses, like 'You  
26 know, boys should not be allowed to act any more wildly than girls'.

27 (Female student F2)

28  
29 Our education does not give tools to tackle gender equality.

30 (Female student 7)

31  
32 The authors' own experiences in teaching the course on gender and home  
33 economics have been very encouraging, and the teaching has inspired new  
34 research on gender and home economics, including the present study. Gender  
35 will be mainstreamed in the forthcoming degree requirements to provide  
36 home-economics student teachers with more opportunities to engage with  
37 gender-related issues in their field.

### 38 39 **Discussion and conclusion**

40  
41 The gender positions present in the home and society at large influence the  
42 practices of home economics education in school. In Ghana, the gendered  
43 division of labour is still prevalent in many communities. The domestic  
44 work of cooking, cleaning and childcare is normally considered women's  
45 work, a perception which feeds into the culture of schools. Various agents of

socialisation usually enforce what is gender-appropriate behaviour through the use of rewards, sanctions and punishments (Nukunya, 2003). These appropriate behaviours do not necessarily advance gender equality but, rather, societal norms. In Ghana, the socialisation process fosters gender-stereotyped roles in the minds of children from infancy. This process is reflected in their education and programme choices at the junior high school level. Participants were of the view that the structure of the Ghanaian educational system at the junior high school level appears to entrench the status quo (see also Akotia & Anum, 2012). Male students select programmes that help portray masculine gender roles, and female students those that help in playing feminine roles. At higher levels of the education system, students continue to select programmes that reflect this gendered-stereotyped mind-set about the division of labour implanted by society. This mind-set is further reinforced later in life by parents, teachers, peers and others in society, causing men to shy away from home economics as they see it as a programme related to female gender roles. This process has resulted in the unequal representation of male and female students in home economics programmes in Ghana. Participants suggested that the cultural values of Ghanaian society should be re-defined, so people could gain the understanding that domestic activities are essential components of healthy living and well-being for all individuals, society and the world at large.

In Finland, gender is a less defining factor in socialisation and education choices. The socialisation of children is done in such a manner that both males and females accept the idea of gender equality. Gender parity in home economics is attributable to the changing gender roles in the Finnish home. In home economics education, the compulsory course in seventh grade provides both boys and girls opportunities to learn about home economics and consider it as a future profession. Teachers in home economics programmes can support these opportunities by ensuring that boys and girls are given equal attention and tasks during home economics lessons. Therefore, (at least most) programmes of study are seen as available to all. The findings from the Finnish student teachers' online discussion reflects the gender-neutral rhetoric that remains heavily present in the equality discourse. However, increased gender awareness emerged in student teachers as the discussion continued throughout the course. Students started to recognise problems in education practices and began to question practices that maintain and reinforce normative gender roles. For future changes, both pre-service and in-service teacher education have crucial roles to play in shifting towards gender awareness.

Even though the societal contexts within which this research was conducted are very different, the findings point to similarities and common challenges. First, the female dominance of the field is not an ideal situation, and collective effort is needed to ensure equal access and participation in home economics subjects, courses and programmes of study. Second, student teachers have relevant suggestions and valuable perspectives to share and should be

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1 listened to. This study also points to the immediate need to include more  
2 gender-related content in the home economics curriculum at the universities  
3 in both countries.

4 Throughout history, significant legislative steps towards gender equality  
5 have been taken, including women's right to vote and participation in the  
6 labour market and the development of child care facilities outside the home,  
7 to mention only a few. These efforts to promote gender equality have mostly  
8 taken place in the public, Hermian, mind-set (see Thompson, 1986). In the  
9 Hestian mind-set, such equality measures have not been seen to the same  
10 extent. In the private space, there is still room for both Hestian and Hermian  
11 mind-sets to complement each other (Thompson, 1986).

12 Home economics education is, and should be, closely linked to pupils'  
13 home culture (Venäläinen, 2010) and able to respond to present societal needs  
14 and challenges (Janhonen-Abuquah & Palojoki, 2015). This analysis points  
15 to the variety of gender-related interconnections between home economics  
16 education and changing societal contexts. Based on this analysis, gender pro-  
17 vides a useful lens for culturally responsive education by pointing out the  
18 various connections influencing the way we see the world and by making  
19 'culture' more tangible, being represented in everyday practices as well as  
20 larger structures. Paying more attention to these interconnections can make  
21 unequal structures and cultural practices visible to learners and open up  
22 avenues to discuss gender in a contextually relevant and culturally responsive  
23 manner. Culturally responsive education calls for knowing learners, so their  
24 voices were heard in this study, focusing on home economics student teachers'  
25 perceptions. Through this study, the authors aimed not only to hear uni-  
26 versity students' voices but also to implement a gender awareness approach  
27 into current and forthcoming teaching modules at universities. Listening to  
28 student teachers' voices on gender can open up opportunities to enhance the  
29 cultural responsiveness of teacher education. By acknowledging student  
30 teachers' prevalent values and attitudes, together with newly emerging ideas,  
31 teacher educators can support the development of the gender responsiveness  
32 of future teachers. For the students, this course and the study process served  
33 as eye-openers and positioned them to implement more gender-aware  
34 approaches in their future careers as teachers and educators.

### 35 Notes

- 36
- 37 1 This ratio reflects the current gender division in enrolment in home economics  
38 teacher education at the University of Helsinki.
  - 39 2 This ratio is equal to that of participants from the University of Helsinki and reflects  
40 the gender division in enrolment in the home economics programmes at the Uni-  
41 versity of Cape Coast.
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