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Home Economics Schools for Women

Privileged Access to Vocational Education in Estonia (1918–1940)

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Abstract *In Estonia, the early 20th century witnessed profound societal transformations that also shaped women's education. Prior to this period, Estonian women primarily involved in household labor, with limited access to formal education. However, beginning in the 1920s, home economics emerged as a recognized academic discipline, leading to the establishment of several specialized schools throughout the country. This article focuses on the period from 1918 to 1940, a pivotal era for the development of home economics in Estonia. It explores the factors that contributed to its growth, the educational content it encompassed, and its impact on the social status of women. On one hand, the institutionalization of home economics elevated domestic tasks into a formal area of study and professional practice, aligning with broader state development and bringing private life into the public domain. On the other hand, it reinforced traditional gender roles, limiting women's influence in the public sphere and maintaining their connection to domestic responsibilities.*

Title *Home Economics Schools for Women – Privileged Access to Vocational Education in Estonia (1918–1940)*

Keywords *Home Economics Schools, History of VET, Estonia, Gender, Activity Theory*

1 Introduction

Estonia's first period of independence (1918–1940) fell within a tense and conflict-ridden era in Europe, often referred to as the truce between the two world wars. As an independent state, Estonia declared its sovereignty on February 24, 1918. Alongside the building of the young nation, efforts were made to develop an education system suited to national

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needs. This had to be done under difficult economic conditions, where ideals, demands, and responsibilities were immense, but resources remained limited.

One of the key issues was women's education and the question of how to involve women in building the state (Poska-Grünthal, 1936; Sirk, 1989). In the public discourse of interwar Estonia, a romanticized and sentimentalized image of the home – as tied to national identity – remained dominant. At the same time, a belief in science emerged, recognizing the value of women's specialized knowledge and skills. However, discussions about virtues that would lead women into a "new life" – such as diligence and perseverance – continued to be framed in a patronizing manner. The 1920s and 1930s saw contradictory interpretations of the role of the housewife, ranging from conservative to feminist perspectives (Kannike, 2021, p. 62). These tensions reflected broader societal transformations. As societies modernized, the concept of the "household economy" underwent a redefinition—shifting from a collection of everyday domestic practices to a formalized academic field (Ehrenreich & English, 2005). In many countries, this shift laid the groundwork for the establishment of specialized schools where home economics emerged as both a professional domain and educational discipline, complete with its own curriculum, teaching methods, materials, and tools (Rasmussen & Andreasen, 2023; Huhtala & Tähtinen, 2014; Benn, 2012). This development signaled not only a reconfiguration of gender roles but also reflected broader national ambitions tied to modernization.

Estonia followed a similar trajectory. The transformation brought with it a notable change in mindset: the sphere of household culture was no longer seen as a private, family-bound issue, but as something with broader social relevance. Women increasingly became the primary voices shaping this field (Kannike, 2021; Poska-Grünthal, 1936), and their knowledge began to be acknowledged as a meaningful contribution to public life. Inspired by developments in the Nordic countries, Estonia initiated the establishment of home economics schools, where female educators played a central role in promoting and institutionalizing new societal values and ways of thinking.

The 1920s were a period of urbanisation that included the development of new family patterns. In addition, an important reason to "investigate the history of women's VET, while simultaneously examining the phenomenon of women's vocational education, is that access to education played an important role in enabling women's participation in public society" (Broberg et al., 2021, p. 219). Similarly, Andreasen and Rasmussen (2022) suggest that women's agency in education was shaped by their efforts to gain recognition for their occupations and expertise, while also contributing to their social status as citizens in a modern democratic society.

Previous studies have tended to focus on the economic, legal, and administrative aspects of vocational education, while giving less attention to how it has been shaped by broader societal transformations (Broberg et al., 2021; Kennik, 1991). This study aims to explore the development of home economics education in Estonia between 1918 and 1940, analyzing the factors that influenced its growth, its educational content, and its impact on women's social status. Two research questions guide the study: (1) Which key factors influenced the establishment and expansion of home economics schools in Estonia during the 1920s and 1930s? (2) What were the primary tensions associated with the institutionalisation of home economics education?

2 Context of the Study

The priority in Estonia after gainig independence was the establishment of a democratic and native language education system from primary school to university.

By the late 1930s, Estonia's education system had become closely aligned with developments in other countries. The advancement of school curricula and teacher education curricula demonstrated an active adoption of educational reform ideas circulating in US and Western Europe (Trasberg & Heinsalu, 2025). For instance, Estonia drew inspiration from German experimental pedagogy, while concepts such as student intelligence testing and progressive pedagogy from the United States were received with enthusiasm. Finland also served as an important reference point, particularly regarding school organization, curriculum planning, and teacher preparation. There was a strong demand for secondary and higher education. According to the 1934 census, 10.1 % of Estonians had completed secondary education, with women making up 64 % of this group. University education had been attained by 2 % of the population, of whom 19.5 % were women. The most significant progress had been made in secondary education, with over one-tenth of the population having attended secondary school by 1934 (Karjahärm & Sirk, 2001, p. 21–22). To understand this development, it is important to consider the social and occupational distribution of the population. In a relatively small country with 1.1 million inhabitants, 67 % of the population was engaged in agriculture. Farming was not seen as just an economic sector but as the backbone of the nation (Kasekamp, 2010), which shaped expectations for education. From the beginning of independence, compulsory schooling was established for children aged 9–14, which was extended in 1920 to ages 7–16, forming a six-year primary school system. The second level of the unified school system consisted of a five-year secondary school (*gymnasium*), from which students could proceed to university, initially without entrance exams.

Special attention was given to secondary education, as it was considered a key factor in building the nation state. Although students could choose between different branches of study in *gymnasium*, humanities education dominated. By 1935, 68 % of Estonia's 75 *gymnasiums* focused on humanities, 9 % on sciences, and the remaining percentage was divided between economic and technical fields (Karjahärm & Sirk, 2001). Despite societal expectations, vocational education struggled to become an attractive option or to be integrated into the unified school system. Young people saw secondary school as the only viable path to higher education, leading to discussions in the late 1930s about an overproduction of intellectuals and an education crisis (Veiderma, 1938).

This led to a period of educational reform, with an increased focus on vocational education. In 1937, the Law on Vocational Education and Training Institutions was passed (Kutsehariduslikkude õppeasutiste, 1937). Under the new system, vocational schools were categorized into three types: agricultural, technical/industrial, and home economics schools. These schools were also divided into three levels: lower-level vocational schools provided only professional training, mid-level vocational schools offered both general and professional education, and higher-level vocational schools provided an education equivalent to *gymnasium* along with professional qualifications. The impact of this Law on the attractiveness of vocational education was noticeable, and within two years (1937–1939), the number of students in vocational education increased from 8,956

to 11,915, while the number of students in general secondary education declined (Elango, 1977, p. 254). Unfortunately, the full implementation of this new system was interrupted by the Soviet occupation in 1940, which halted the ongoing reforms (Kala, et al., 2019).

3 Theoretical and Methodological Framework of the Study

This research is based on activity theory. Activity theory provides a valuable framework for studying women's vocational education in Estonia during the 1920s and 1930s, a critical period following the country's independence since 1918. During this time, Estonia underwent significant social and economic transformations, including efforts to modernize education and expand opportunities for women.

Activity theory, developed from the work of Vygotsky (1997) and later expanded by Engeström (1987), is a sociocultural framework that examines human actions within their historical, cultural, and societal contexts. Using this framework, we can examine how institutional structures (new types of vocational institutions), tools (such as curricula and training programs), and societal expectations influenced women's roles (Apple & Coleman, 2003).

Additionally, activity theory helps contextualize how policy changes, such as the introduction of new forms of schooling and shifts in labor demands, impacted women's access to education and employment. The contradictions between traditional gender norms and the emerging need for skilled female labor can be explored through Engeström's (1987) concept of contradictions and expansive learning.

According to Engeström & Sannino (2010), activity theory is a dialectical theory, and the dialectical concept of contradiction plays a crucial part in it. In the Estonian context, the tension between traditional gender expectations – where women were largely confined to household responsibilities and the increasing need for skilled female labor in emerging industries created a space for learning and institutional reform. Vocational schools became sites of transformation, where women engaged in new educational practices, redefined their professional identities, and contributed to societal change. Historical analysis through this framework highlights how women navigated these systemic changes, adapted to new professional roles, and contributed to broader societal development in Estonia's early years of independence. The stages in the analytical process are adapted from Broberg et al., (2021, p. 220): identifying societal motives, the educational response to societal changes and finding points of tensions.

Sources for the research data consisted of archive documents, education acts, pedagogic literature and periodicals from the years 1918–1940. The materials studied in Estonia's National Archives included files of home economics schools that referred to activities, study programs and teaching staff of these institutions. In addition, archival materials from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Ministry of Education were studied. Secondary materials included: education laws (published in *Riigi Teataja* [State Gazette] 1918–1940), statistics related to education as well as authentic reports, for example, the 1938 review of *Vocational Education in Estonia*, published by Ministry of Education.

The development of home economics in Estonia was closely intertwined with the activities of women's organizations from the very beginning. Therefore, an important

group of sources from this period consists of archival documents from various women's associations and organizations, such as the Estonian Women's Organizations Union, founded in 1920 (renamed the Estonian Women's Union in 1930), the Estonian Rural Women's Society, established in 1928, and the Home Economics Chamber, founded in 1936. Also periodicals played a significant role, reaching many households. These included *Eesti Naine* [Estonian Woman] (published since 1924), *Taluperenaine* [Rural Woman] (since 1927), and *Naiste Hääl* [Women's Voice] (1926–1932). With the support of these magazines, by the early 1930s, an active segment of both rural and urban women had become engaged in shaping modern everyday life. The archives also contain photographs introducing the learning environment of home economics schools. In this article, the photo collections of the Estonian Pedagogical Archive Museum and National Archives were used.

4 Identifying Societal Motives

Home economics can be defined as knowledge, skills, and competences associated with running a household, including cooking, nutrition, clothing, childcare, and other aspects of homemaking (Andreasen & Rasmussen, 2022; Huhtala & Tähtinen, 2014). In the 1920s, the establishment of home economics schools in Estonia was driven by both socio-economic changes and ideological shifts in education. The government prioritized creating a national education system that aligned with the needs of a modernizing society (Trasberg & Heinsalu, 2025). The rise of home economics schools was part of this effort, aiming to provide women with vocational education while reinforcing their role in the household and society. Inspired by Nordic models, these schools sought to professionalize 'domestic' work by incorporating scientific and technical knowledge into home management, nutrition, and childcare (Kannike, 2021).

Several key factors contributed to the emergence and development of home economics schools in the 1920s. First, Estonia was still a predominantly agrarian society (Kasekamp, 2010). Rural households required efficient household management, and home economics education was seen as essential for improving rural women's skills. Second, the prevailing discourse of the interwar period emphasized women's roles as caretakers of both the family and the nation, portraying household knowledge and caregiving skills as patriotic duty. Home economics education, therefore, became a means of shaping "ideal" Estonian women who could contribute to national progress through their work in the household (Kannike, 2021; Poska-Grünthal, 1936). Periodicals aimed at women began highlighting the importance of home economics schools, emphasizing their role in enhancing everyday living standards through efficient household management, nutritious cooking, and proper hygiene practices. In 1920, *Tallinna Teataja* [*Tallinn Gazette*] criticized women's household skills, noting that while many believed they could weave, sew, wash, and iron, these tasks actually required formal instruction and guidance from an expert.

During the interwar period Estonian women's organizations played a pivotal role in advancing women's rights and societal reforms (Poska-Grünthal, 1936; Sirk, 1989). They became a key factor in organizing vocational education for women by arranging courses

in cooking, handicrafts, gardening, and other subjects, as well as establishing home economics schools.

The Tartu Women's Society organized the first Estonian Women's Congress in 1917, where it was decided that all women should get vocational education. To achieve this, new schools should be established and existing ones expanded. The aim was for every woman to strive for a balance between career and family life (Eesti naiste, 1917).

This congress led to the formation of the Estonian Women's Union in 1920, uniting various women's groups to collectively advocate for gender equality and social reforms. Emerging organizations and their leaders were instrumental in shaping the social and political landscape, advocating for women's rights, education, and active participation in public life. Women's unions began promoting home economics as a nationally significant field of work that should be recognized as an equal profession. For example, the chairwoman of the Estonian Women's Union, Marie Reisik, emphasized that a woman's efficient and purposeful work at home enables the family to manage economically. She argued that its value is often greater than the income earned by the husband and its purchasing power. Moreover, she highlighted that women are responsible for raising the youth, sustaining families, and ensuring the vitality of the entire nation (Reisik, 1937). Marie Reisik and other prominent figures in the Estonian women's movement Vera Poska-Grünthal (1898–1986), Minni Kurs-Olesk (1879–1940), Helmi Jansen (1908–1960) underlined the importance of education for women at both secondary and vocational schools. They emphasized the benefits of streamlining household management and safeguarding women's employment, while also drawing attention to the poor and often overlooked conditions faced by women working within the home (Kannike, 2025).

A significant qualitative leap occurred with the establishment of the Chamber of Home Economics in 1935, which meant that housework was publicly recognized as equal to other professions. In addition, one of the major achievements of the Estonian women's emancipation movement was the establishment of the Estonian Women's Union Home Economics Institute in 1935. This institution, which in modern terms offered applied higher education, provided programs in home economics, social welfare, and kindergarten teaching. Remarkably, the curriculum included not only practical subjects but also sociology, cultural and art history, and economics (Kannike, 2021, p. 73). With state support, it opened an ultra-modern school building in 1939 (see Figure 1–2). The building was equipped with central heating, good ventilation, specially commissioned furniture and teaching aids tailored to the needs of the school, and modern laboratories for studying food chemistry, as well as a 115 m² kitchen designed for mass catering instruction. As emphasized in a newspaper article introducing the opening of the school, the kitchen featured, alongside two wood-fired stoves, a modern Swedish AGA stove, heated with coke, which remained warm for 12 consecutive hours. According to the article, a similar stove was even used in the White House in Washington (Kodumajandusinstituut ajakohases, 1939)[1]. The rationale behind such a significant investment was the pursuit of new vocational avenues for women—ones that would ensure the acquired knowledge would not be lost if a woman married and did not work outside

1 The opening of the Home Economics Institute building became a public event that was covered by the media, and a short film was produced (Envald,1939).

the home, but could instead be applied within her household. The Home Economics Institute building with its contemporary learning environment, became a model for households and demonstrated the changing status of "women's work". The Institute was not only a center for vocational education but also a symbol of modern educational infrastructure, reflecting the elevated status of home economics as a professional field (Kodumajanduse Instituut, 1935; Veiderma, 1938).

Concluding, the adoption of a more modern lifestyle, the establishment of new farms, the introduction of updated tools and the rising European standards – all of these developments required women to acquire new skills and knowledge. Expert care for the home and family became an inseparable part and primary goal of home economics education.

Figure 1: Home Economics Institute Building in Tallinn (1939)

Note. The Estonian Women's Union's Home Economics Institute building (designed by architect Arthur Jürvetson) was officially opened on April 29, 1939, in a ceremony attended by the President of the Republic. The school building was considered one of the most functional and aesthetically impressive educational facilities of Estonia's first period of independence. It featured a wide range of classrooms, laboratories, and workshops, all specially equipped to support home economics instruction. From: Eesti Naisliidu Kodumajanduse Instituut, hoone [Main building of Estonian Women's Union Home Economics Institute, Photograph], by H. Tölpt, 1939, Estonian Pedagogical Archive Museum (File F0007635), http://arhmus.tlu.ee/cgi-bin/epam?oid=78173

Figure 2: School Kitchen in Home Economics Institute in Tallinn (1939)

Note. In the newly constructed school buildings, great attention was given to modern equipment, lighting, fire safety, and ventilation. As one of the key areas of instruction was dietetics and healthy nutrition, and the overall emphasis was on developing practical skills, the presence of well-designed and fully equipped kitchens was considered especially important. From: Eesti Naisliidu Kodumajanduse Instituut, köök [Kitchen of Estonian Women's Union Home Economics Institute, Photograph], by H. Tölpt, 1939, Estonian Pedagogical Archive Museum, (File F0007635), http://arhmus.tlu.ee/cgi-bin/epam?oid=78173

5 Educational Responses: Home Economics Schools in 1920/30s

This section explores the educational responses to societal transformations in interwar Estonia, focusing on the establishment and expansion of home economics schools in both rural and urban settings. It examines the development of a comprehensive and practice-oriented curriculum that combined general education with specialized vocational training. Particular emphasis is placed on the inspiring learning environment that characterized these schools and served as a model for newly established households.

5.1 Opening of Home Economics Schools

Home economics schools were established in both rural and urban areas, as women in farms and towns required different skills and knowledge. Until 1935, these educational institutions operated under two ministries, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry

of Agriculture, depending on whether they provided training for farm housewives or prepared housekeepers and maids.

The Ministry of Education emphasized the need to develop home economics schools, as rational home management was considered crucial for both national well-being and economic development (Kodumajandusliku kutsehariduse, 1935). It was recognized that Estonia should learn European models, particularly the Finnish and Swedish approach to home economics education (Kirjavahetus välismaistest, 1934). To gain experience, leaders of the women's movement and other organizations traveled abroad to observe these systems firsthand. However, Estonia did not adopt the Finnish model, where schools specialized in a single branch, such as textile work, nursing, or handicraft (Heikkilä, 2003). Instead, the Swedish model served as a greater inspiration, particularly in terms of organizational structure. In Sweden, home economics schools functioned as umbrella institutions, covering various fields such as cooking, textile work, and child care, complemented with further education for management of, for instance, cookery in institutions (Broberg et al., 2021. p. 225).

At the beginning of Estonia's independence, combined agricultural and home economics schools were primarily established under one roof. However, later, specialization took place. In the 1939/40 academic year, Estonia had 46 agricultural schools, 8 women's industrial schools, and 30 home economics schools at various levels (Lepp, 1940). The first instructors were recruited from Finnish home economics schools, as well as from among Estonian women who had studied in local handicraft schools. In exceptional cases, specialists from abroad were invited to teach (Kennik, 1991, p. 48).

Table 1: Types of Home Economics Schools, Graduates, and Specialities

Type of School	Number of Graduates	Specialities
1-year rural home economics school	2958	Farm housewife, Maid
2-year urban home economics school	260	Maid, Housekeeper
Women's industrial school in towns	965	Housekeeper,Urban housewife, Maid
Home economics secondary school	220	Trained homemaker
Higher home economics school	457	Household advisers, Day care nurses, Teachers for home economics schools

Note. The table summarizes different types of home economics schools, the number of their graduates, and related specialities. Data from A. Lepp, 1940, Lõpetanute arv õppeasutisis 1919–39 [Number of graduates in the educational institutions 1919–39]. Eesti Statistika Kuukiri [Estonian Statistics Monthly], 222(5), p. 226 (https://www.digar.ee/arhiiv/et/perioodika/29970).

Between 1919 and 1939, a total of 4,860 female students graduated from home economics schools (see Table 1). By the late 1930s, the network of this type of schools formed a significant part of the entire vocational education system, with about 17 % of all vocational school graduates coming from home economics schools (Karjahärm & Sirk, 2001). As can be seen from the photos (Figure 2–7), the learning environment of the home economics schools was inspiring: the classrooms were spacious and well decorated, equipped with modern technology and teaching aids. The existence of school kitchens was particularly important from the point of view of hygiene and healthy eating. It was similar to Denmark, where the "school kitchen represented a materialisation of home economics (…) and was an important means of communicating norms and knowledge" (Rasmussen & Andreasen, 2023, p. 106). Great emphasis was placed on proper dress—students wore a school uniform and work protective clothing. All this was to become an example for households.

Figure 3: Students Weaving on Looms at the Helme Home Economics School (1936)

Note. Helme Home Economics School, established in a former manor house, offered several areas of specialization, including weaving as an integral part of the home economics curriculum. All students were required to wear a uniform dress and apron, reflecting the school's emphasis on discipline and professionalism in vocational training. From: Helme Kodunduskeskkool ja Helme Põllutöökool [Helme Home Economics School, Photograph], 1936, Estonian Pedagogical Archive Museum (File F0007475), http://arhmus.tlu.ee/cgi-bin/epam?oid=78284

Figure 4: Orgita Home Economics School Greenhouse (1935)

Note. Although education at Orgita Home Economics School was free, students were required to cover the costs of boarding and meals. To help meet these expenses, the school offered paid practical training opportunities – such as work in the greenhouse and other school facilities – which enabled students to earn an income and partially support themselves during their studies. From: Orgita Kodumajanduskooli kasvuhoones [Greenhouse of Orgita Home Economics School, Photograph], 1935, Estonian Pedagogical Archive Museum (File F0007479), http://arhmus.tlu.ee/cgi-bin/epam?oid=78287

In Estonia, the responsibility for establishing and developing home economics schools was assigned to the Ministry of Agriculture until 1935, when it was transferred to the Ministry of Education. In 1925, the Ministry of Agriculture defined the types of schools and developed an initial curriculum covering four key areas of a farm woman's responsibilities: cooking, handicrafts, horticulture and animal farming etc. Initially, one-year home economics schools were established to train farm housewives, targeting girls who had completed 6-years of primary schooling. The 1931 Vocational Education Act officially defined three forms of home economics education: (1) One or two-years home economics school following six-year primary school; (2) Two-year home economics school based on *gymnasium* education and (3) Three-year higher-level home economics schools (Kutseharidus Eestis, 1938). Those schools aimed to prevent rural girls from moving to urban schools, which could alienate them from rural life. A total of five such schools were established in different regions of Estonia. The most popular school was Kehtna Higher Home Economics School, which had high competition, and only 20–30 % of applicants were admitted. It was established with the goal of training home economics teachers and instructors. The school had departments for horticulture, home economics, and 'domestic' industries. It stood out due to its extensive teaching

resources, including well-equipped workshops, a large school garden, a tree nursery, and a beekeeping facility.

Home economics schools were also established for young women of other nationalities. For example, in 1922, the *Vinni Foundation Girls' Household School* was registered at Vinni Manor in Virumaa (Rajamäe, 2014). This school was intended for Baltic German young women, with German as the language of instruction. After the enactment of the Cultural Autonomy Act, the school came under the administration of the German Cultural Council. Many of the students were impoverished noblewomen who took advantage of the opportunity to acquire practical home economics knowledge and skills through a one-year course after completing an 11-year secondary school (*gymnasium*). In 1938, a three-year Vinni Private Specialized Home Economics School was founded, admitting students who had completed nine years of schooling (Kuum, 1998). However, in the following year, when most Baltic Germans left Estonia, German-language education at Vinni came to an end.

Estonian home economics education also served as an inspiration for foreign colleagues. Kehtna became a model school for home economics, attracting numerous educational and women's movement leaders from Finland, Sweden, Norway, and other countries. Also students from Finland, Sweden, and Latvia came to Kehtna to acquire knowledge. The school was visited by the President of Finland, members of the Finnish Parliament, and representatives of the Latvian Parliament (Soome parlamendiliikmete, 1929).

A major vocational education reform took place in 1937, further expanding the home economics school network (Vocational Education and Training Institutions Act, 1937). By 1940, those schools existed in every county, with a total of 30 schools.

Figure 5: Kehtna Higher Home Economics School, Assembly Hall (1936)

Note. Kehtna Higher Home Economics School frequently hosted guests and held formal events and receptions in its Assembly Hall. Organizing and carrying out these events formed an integral part of the students' practical training, providing them with essential skills and competencies for future professional and social responsibilities. From: Kehtna Kõrgema Kodumajanduskooli peosaal [Assembly Hall of Kehtna Higher Home Economics School, Photograph] by J. & P. Parikas 1936, National Archives' Photo Collection (File 2111.1.13808.7), https://www.meediateek.ee/photo/view?id=456807&l=1&q=EAA.2111.1.13808

Figure 6: Särevere Home Economics School, Cooking Class (1936)

Note. At Särevere Home Economics School, which offered a one-year program, students received training in animal and poultry husbandry, weaving, and cooking. The school maintained its own household with dairy cows, horses, and chickens, producing all necessary food supplies on-site. This self-sufficient household also served as an excellent practical training base, providing students with hands-on experience in various aspects of farm work. From: Särevere Kodumajanduskooli elust (1936). [From the daily life of Särevere Home Economics School]. [Photograph]. Estonian Pedagogical Archive Museum (File F07654), http://arhmus.tlu.ee/cgi-bin/epam?oid=78201

Figure 7: Kehtna Higher Home Economics School, Science Class (1936)

Note. Kehtna Higher Home Economics School offered a well-rounded education that combined practical skills with general academic subjects. Alongside specialized classrooms for canning, bread baking, weaving, ironing, and cooking, the school featured fully equipped physics and chemistry laboratories, allowing students to engage in hands-on scientific experimentation as part of their curriculum. From: Kehtna Kõrgema Kodumajanduskooli õpilased tunnis [Students of the Kehtna Higher Home Economics School in science class]. [Photograph], by J. & P. Parikas. Estonian Pedagogical Archive Museum, (File F0007481), http://arhmus.tlu.ee/cgi-bin/epam?oid=78196

5.2 Curriculum of Home Economics Schools

The curriculum of home economics schools was extensive, covering a wide range of subjects, including nutrition and cooking, sewing, handicrafts, household maintenance, childcare, healthcare, social studies, family and education studies, home furnishing and decoration, gardening, and bookkeeping. In rural schools, poultry, beekeeping and livestock farming were also part of the curriculum.

In all schools, the subject with the highest number of lessons was cooking, followed by clothing production and handicrafts. The number of weekly hours varied by school type, ranging from 40 hours per week in urban schools to 48 hours per week in rural schools. Practical training played a significant role, with rural schools offering up to 28 practical hours per week, in addition to a summer internship lasting up to four weeks (Kutsehariduslikkude õppeasutiste, 1937).

Figure 8: Kehtna Higher Home Economics School, feeding calves (1936)

Note. Kehtna Higher Home Economics School was notable for its extensive material and technical resources, including around 400 hectares of farmland, 160 hectares of pasture, a large fruit and vegetable garden, a tree nursery, and a beekeeping facility. Among the various activities, caring for calves was especially favored by students, highlighting their enthusiasm for practical work and close connection with rural life. From: Kehtna Kõrgema Kodumajanduskooli õpilased noorkarja jootmas, [Students of Kehtna Higher Home Economics School feeding calves, Photograph], 1936. National Archives' Photo Collection (File EFA:38.3-381). https://www.meediateek.ee/photo/view?id=268165&q=Kehtna+K%C3%B5rgema+Kodumajanduskooli+%C3%B5pilased+noorkarja+jootmas

Since rural home economics schools were often housed in former manor estates, managing household tasks was integrated into practical training. Students were also responsible for cleaning duties in the school dormitories. Workshops at these schools took on external orders as part of their practical training, and students were invited to official events where they gained hands-on experience in service roles (Kuum, 1998).

Graduates of home economics schools had to pass a vocational examination to obtain their respective qualifications. Those who completed urban-type schools earned the qualification of housekeeper, and after three years of work experience, they could take an advanced exam to attain the title of trained homemaker. Graduates of rural-type schools received qualifications as farmwives and maids.

In the curriculum of home economics secondary schools, the emphasis differed from that of one-year home economics schools. A significant portion of the studies was dedicated to general education subjects (such as native language, foreign languages, and mathematics) to ensure that students' knowledge reached the same level as secondary school graduates. The longer study period allowed for a more in-depth exploration of specialized subjects, as well as the introduction of new topics, such as housing, interior design and decoration, drawing, drafting, and composition (Kennik, 1992). As a result,

graduates of home economics secondary schools were better prepared for their future roles as farmwives, equipped with a broader education that enabled them to develop and maintain both a well-managed household and a high level of rural home culture. This type of education in home economics provided opportunities for employment in paid positions or allowed women to apply their acquired knowledge and skills for the benefit of their families. Women who graduated from home economics secondary school with the title of trained homemaker were highly valued in the workforce, particularly as matrons in kindergartens, orphanages, and sanatoriums.

Figure 9: Kehtna Higher Home Economics School, Outdoor Activities in the School's Nursery (1938)

Note. To support practical training in childcare, Kehtna Higher Home Economics School operated its own nursery. The children, primarily orphans, came from an infant care home and lived on-site, enabling students to gain direct experience in caregiving and early childhood development. From: Kehtna Kõrgema Kodumajanduskooli elust 1935–1937 aastatel [Life of the Kehtna Higher Home Economics School during the years 1935–1937, Photograph], by J. & P. Parikas, ca 1937, Estonian Pedagogical Archive Museum, (File F09697), http://arhmus.tlu.ee/cgi-bin/epam?oid=79510

In conclusion, home economics schools dominated women's vocational education in Estonia. These schools were highly popular among girls, with more applicants than available places. They stood out for their excellent learning environments – many were housed in former manor houses – and successfully integrated practical homemaking skills with intellectual and cultural values.

6 Points of Tensions

This section discusses key tensions in the development of home economics education, focusing on its dual nature, its lower status compared to academic education, and its misalignment with the unified school system and broader vocational education policy.

The dual nature of home economics education

The dual nature of home economics education was reflected on the fact that vocational training was not solely directed at salaried employment but also at enhancing women's private housekeeping skills. As in Sweden (*hushållsskola*—household school) the term *kodumajanduskool* (household school) was used, which reflects societal tensions regarding women's roles, as these terms carried different symbolic meanings related to 'domestic' labor and status within the household. Most graduates came from rural home economics schools, which prepared for the status of "farm hauswife" (see specialities in Table 1).

Conflict with academic education

The expansion of vocational education was a response to growing concerns over the lack of practical training opportunities for women. While gymnasium education focused mainly on the humanities, vocational schools, including household management schools, offered a more practical curriculum, making them an alternative for young women who did not pursue higher academic studies (Grüntal, 1937). Despite these advancements, home economics education remained undervalued compared to traditional secondary education, as many continued to perceive general education as the best path for social mobility.

Mismatch with the unified school system and image of VET

The principle of a unified school system was applied only selectively, and vocational school students were often seen by policymakers and educators as labor force contributors to a specific trade (Kennik, 1992). Lower-level vocational education primarily aimed to increase the number of skilled workers rather than offer pathways for further studies and self-determined career development.

For some young people, the structure of vocational schools seemed confusing, and discriminatory. For instance, graduates of agricultural secondary schools were legally entitled to enroll in home economics high school, while graduates of (regular) home economics schools did not have this right. The lack of leadership in vocational education at the government level, along with inconsistencies and disregard for the unified school principle, were major factors contributing to the low reputation of vocational education among the public.

7 Discussion and Conclusion

This study examines the development of home economics education in Estonia during intewar period, focusing on the factors that contributed to its establishment and tensions resulting from the institutionalization of home economics education. As a framework for studying women's vocational education, activity theory (Engeström, 1987) allows to explore how institutional structures, societal norms, and historical influences have shaped educational opportunities for women. In this context, the establishment and expansion of home economics education can be seen as an evolving activity system, shaped by the tensions and contradictions between societal needs, institutional structures, and ideological discourses on gender roles.

The development of home economics as an academic field of knowledge was important in professionalising and supporting increasing the social status of women. The institutionalization of home economics had a dual effect on women's social status. On one hand, the development of home economics as an academic field of knowledge was important in professionalising, supporting and increasing the social status of women (Reisik, 1927; Mäelo, 1999). It provided them with educational and professional opportunities that were previously unavailable. By turning domestic responsibilities into a structured field of knowledge, home economics allowed women to gain expertise in areas that were increasingly recognized as essential for the well-being of society (Kannike, 2021; Kannike 2025). This contributed to their professionalization in new roles such as household advisers, day care nurses, teachers for home economics schools and social workers, giving them more visibility and influence in society. In Estonia's case, the school's infrastructure also played a big role. Most of the schools were located in former manor buildings, which provided an inspiring learning environment with their physical surroundings (beautiful rooms, modern teaching equipment). The innovations experienced soon became a reality and transformed society (Rajamäe, 2014).

On the other hand, the content of the studies in home economics schools demonstrated a "gendered cultural character", emphasing the role of women as housewives and their functions of housekeeping (Andreasen & Rasmussen, 2022, p. 80) and reinforced traditional gender roles by keeping women closely tied to the domestic sphere. Although the education system provided women with skills and knowledge, it did not significantly challenge the prevailing societal expectation that their primary role was to be homemakers. Instead of opening pathways into broader professional fields, home economics education often confined women to gendered occupations.

The community that shaped and supported home economics education was composed of multiple stakeholders, including various women's organizations and their leaders (Apple & Coleman, 2003; Kannike 2025). These groups played a crucial role in shaping educational policy, establishing new schools, and promoting home economics as a respectable profession. Furthermore, international collaboration, particularly with Finland and Sweden, created transnational learning networks that contributed to the development of home economics curricula and teacher training. Students, as active participants, were not only learners but also contributors to the system of home economics education, particularly through practical training that extended beyond the classroom

and into real-world applications, such as household management, childcare services, and community development projects (Sirk, 1989).

In conclusion, the establishment and expansion of home economics schools in Estonia during the interwar period can be understood as an evolving activity system within which multiple actors—women, educators, policymakers, and international collaborators—interacted to transform household labor into a structured field of vocational education. It becomes evident that this transformation was driven by contradictions between traditional gender roles and modernizing forces, between rural and urban educational needs, and between national priorities and international influences. These tensions not only shaped the trajectory of home economics education but also contributed to broader societal debates about women's roles, vocational training, and the professionalization of 'domestic' work.

This study primarily draws on archive documents and secondary sources to examine the development of home economics education in Estonia during the interwar period. A limitation lies in the nature of archival materials, which may reflect institutional or dominant societal perspectives while underrepresenting the voices and lived experiences of the women directly involved in these educational programs. The absence of personal narratives or oral histories limits the depth of understanding regarding how women themselves perceived and navigated the opportunities and constraints of home economics education. The future research could explore the lived experiences of students and teachers within home economics schools through personal letters, memoirs, or oral interviews, where available. Such qualitative approaches could provide deeper insight into how individuals perceived and internalized (or resisted) the gendered ideologies embedded in vocational education.

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