

Comparative Insights on Gender, Family-Friendly Policies, and the Motherhood Penalty in Higher Education Institutions: Malta as a Revealing Small-State Case in International Perspective

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Abstract: This paper examines the persistence of gender inequality and the motherhood penalty in higher education institutions (HEIs), focusing on Malta within an international comparative perspective. Drawing on feminist institutionalism and institutional ethnography, it explores how formal family-friendly policies interact with cultural expectations and institutional norms to shape career outcomes for both academic and support staff. Comparative evidence demonstrates that while Nordic countries have mitigated the motherhood penalty through supportive policies and more egalitarian cultural norms, Anglo-Saxon and Central and Eastern European systems continue to reproduce significant inequalities due to the gendered uptake of flexible work arrangements, limited childcare provision, and persistent expectations surrounding maternal caregiving.

The Maltese case illustrates how small-state and Southern European contexts reproduce and intensify these dynamics. Although policies such as flexible working arrangements and parental leave formally exist, their uptake remains highly gendered: men rarely utilise them, while women who do often experience stalled career progression and reduced opportunities for advancement. At the same time, the entrenched ideal of the “ideal academic” or “ideal worker,” characterised by uninterrupted availability and productivity, continues to marginalise caregivers. By extending the analysis to both academic and support staff, the paper demonstrates how occupational segregation and the devaluation of feminised labour sustain systemic inequalities across institutional structures.

Crucially, the paper argues that Malta should not be viewed merely as another national example, but rather as an intensified small-state case that exposes the structural limitations of policy-led equality models.

The motherhood penalty is shown to emerge not only from policy gaps, but also from institutional valuation systems that privilege uninterrupted, research-intensive career trajectories over relational, administrative, and care-oriented labour.

Conceptually, the paper advances a model in which the motherhood penalty emerges through the interaction of three mutually reinforcing systems: policy design, cultural norms, and institutional valuation structures. It concludes that genuine gender equity in higher education requires not only policy reform, but also deeper cultural and institutional transformation capable of redefining academic success and challenging gendered assumptions surrounding care and productivity.

Keywords: Motherhood penalty; higher education; gender inequality; Malta; family-friendly policies; institutional ethnography

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have become central sites for examining how gendered inequalities persist despite decades of policy reform. While access to academia has widened and the number of women entering both academic and administrative roles has increased, patterns of inequality remain striking. Women continue to face barriers to career advancement, experience disproportionate levels of job precarity, and are systematically excluded from senior leadership positions (Aiston & Jung, 2015; Rosa & Clavero, 2022). These disadvantages are magnified when women become mothers, giving rise to what scholars describe as the “motherhood penalty”: the systematic disadvantages mothers face in terms of wages, promotions, research opportunities, and access to leadership (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007; Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020).

The motherhood penalty is not uniform. Research has shown that its scale and manifestation vary depending on national policy regimes, institutional cultures, and socio-economic conditions (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020). Nordic welfare states, with extensive childcare provision and gender-equal parental leave, demonstrate how institutional arrangements can reduce inequalities. Conversely, in many Southern, Anglo-Saxon, and Central-Eastern European contexts, women continue to experience wage and career penalties associated with motherhood. These cross-national variations highlight how institutional logics shape the reproduction or mitigation of gender inequality. While these patterns are well established in the literature, this paper moves

beyond documenting inequality to interrogating the institutional logics that sustain it. In doing so, it responds to a key gap in existing scholarship: the need to explain not only that the motherhood penalty persists, but why it remains resilient even in contexts where formal equality measures are in place.

Despite a rich body of scholarship on women in academia, research has disproportionately focused on academic staff, with less attention paid to administrative and support staff who play a critical role in the functioning of HEIs. This represents a significant gap. Support staff, like academics, navigate family responsibilities within gendered institutional cultures, yet their experiences are rarely analysed alongside those of academics. Moreover, these groups are often concentrated in feminised roles, administration, student services, human resources, that are undervalued within institutional hierarchies (Charles & Bradley, 2002). Examining both groups together provides a more comprehensive picture of how gendered inequality is reproduced across the higher education workforce. By including both academic and support staff, the paper challenges academic-centric analyses and demonstrates that the motherhood penalty operates as a structural feature of the higher education workforce. This broader lens shifts the analytical focus from individual career trajectories to institutional systems of valuation, recognition, and reward.

The Maltese context offers a particularly valuable lens through which to explore these dynamics. Rather than treating Malta as a peripheral or illustrative case, this paper positions it as a revealing case that makes visible the limits of policy-driven approaches to gender equality. As a small-state system with a single public university, Malta offers a unique institutional setting in which policy, culture, and organisational structures are tightly interconnected and highly visible. This enables closer examination of how gendered inequalities are reproduced and normalised within institutional life. Malta is a small Southern European state with high levels of female participation in education but persistent gender inequality in the labour market. Family-friendly policies exist in law and collective agreements, but their uptake remains highly gendered. Studies have shown that Maltese fathers tend to avoid flexible arrangements, perceiving them as incompatible with expectations of male breadwinning, while mothers who make use of such measures often experience stalled progression and stigma from peers and managers (European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2024; Central Bank of Malta, 2023). In academia, this dynamic is

compounded by entrenched cultural expectations of the “ideal academic,” defined as an individual who is constantly available, uninterrupted by caregiving responsibilities, and committed to long working hours (Orupabo et al., 2025).

Theoretical frameworks such as feminist institutionalism and institutional ethnography are crucial to understanding these dynamics. Feminist institutionalism emphasises that institutions are not gender-neutral; rather, they embed gendered assumptions into policies, norms, and power structures, which then shape outcomes for men and women differently (Acker, 2006). Institutional ethnography complements this by examining how everyday practices and lived experiences intersect with formal policy frameworks to produce inequality (Smith, 2005). Together, these perspectives highlight the gap between policy and practice: even when family-friendly measures exist, institutional cultures often undermine their effectiveness.

This paper therefore has two primary aims. First, it situates Malta within broader international debates on gender, work, and higher education, using comparative evidence to examine how structural and cultural contexts shape the motherhood penalty. Second, it extends the scope of analysis beyond academic staff to include administrative and support staff, thereby addressing a significant gap within existing scholarship. In doing so, the paper offers a more comprehensive understanding of how gendered inequalities are reproduced across the higher education workforce.

Methodologically, the paper is best understood as a theoretically informed comparative synthesis that integrates cross-national literature with an in-depth analysis of the Maltese higher education context. It draws on feminist institutionalism and institutional ethnography not only as theoretical frameworks, but also as epistemological approaches that foreground the relationship between institutional structures and lived experience. This approach enables the analysis to move beyond descriptive comparison toward deeper analytical explanation and critical reflection on the institutional mechanisms through which gender inequality is sustained.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section introduces the theoretical framework, combining feminist institutionalism with institutional ethnography to explain how policies and practices intersect to reproduce inequality. Section 3 provides a comparative context, reviewing cross-national evidence on the motherhood penalty and family-friendly measures. Section 4

presents findings from Malta in international perspective, focusing on three dimensions: (1) the use and cultural framing of family-friendly policies, (2) the persistence of the “ideal academic” and associated gatekeeping mechanisms, and (3) occupational segregation and the devaluation of feminised roles. Section 5 discusses the implications of these findings for theory and practice, and Section 6 concludes by outlining recommendations for achieving genuine gender equity in HEIs.

By situating Malta’s higher education sector within a comparative framework, this paper demonstrates that while national contexts differ, the underlying dynamics of gender inequality are shaped by deeply entrenched institutional and cultural logics. The motherhood penalty is sustained not only by gaps in policy provision, but also by institutional cultures that define commitment, productivity, and excellence through gendered assumptions. Addressing these dynamics is essential if HEIs are to achieve meaningful equity across the higher education workforce.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Institutional Theory

Feminist Institutional Theory (FIT) through a gendered lens provides a critical lens for understanding how gendered power relations are embedded within institutions. Unlike traditional institutionalist approaches, which often assume neutrality, FIT recognises that policies, norms, and organisational structures are inherently gendered and reproduce inequalities in subtle and systemic ways (Acker, 2006; Mackay et al., 2010). Within higher education institutions (HEIs), FIT helps explain how formal rules, evaluation criteria, and promotion structures intersect with informal norms, shaping career trajectories differently for men and women.

For example, “ideal worker” norms, expecting uninterrupted availability, long working hours, and high mobility, reflect historically masculine assumptions of professional commitment (Orupabo et al., 2025; O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005). Mothers and caregivers, who must balance professional and family responsibilities, are disproportionately disadvantaged by these norms, highlighting the structural embedding of gender within institutional logics (Acker, 2006; Bird, 2011). FIT therefore situates the motherhood penalty within broader organisational and societal contexts, linking policy gaps to cultural expectations and structural constraints.

Institutional Ethnography

Institutional ethnography (IE) complements FIT by focusing on the lived experiences of individuals within institutions (Smith, 2005). While FIT illuminates structural and normative factors, IE examines how these factors are enacted, reinforced, or resisted in everyday practice. Through IE, it becomes possible to trace how formal policies, such as parental leave, flexible hours, or career breaks, interact with informal norms, peer expectations, and managerial practices to reproduce or mitigate gendered disadvantages.

In higher education, IE reveals that family-friendly policies often fail to achieve their intended outcomes because their uptake is gendered. Men are reluctant to utilise such measures due to fear of stigma or career repercussions, while women who use them may face slowed promotion, exclusion from networks, or perceptions of reduced commitment (Craig & Mullan, 2010; European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2024; Blom et al., 2025). IE highlights these disjunctions between policy design and practice, making visible the hidden processes that sustain inequality despite formal provisions.

Intersection of Policy and Culture: Explaining the Motherhood Penalty

Integrating Feminist Institutional Theory (FIT) and Institutional Ethnography (IE) provides a robust framework for understanding the persistence of the motherhood penalty within higher education institutions (HEIs). Policies alone are insufficient to eliminate gender disparities when broader cultural and institutional norms remain unchanged. While formal equality measures may exist, their implementation and uptake are shaped by deeply embedded assumptions regarding gender, caregiving, and professional commitment.

Within the Maltese context, FIT and IE together demonstrate how small-state characteristics, combined with conservative gender norms, continue to reproduce the motherhood penalty despite the presence of family-friendly policies. Men rarely utilise flexible working arrangements or parental leave, reinforcing traditional divisions of caregiving labour, while women who make use of such measures frequently encounter stalled career progression, reduced visibility, and subtle forms of institutional gatekeeping (Central Bank of Malta, 2023; European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2024; European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2024).

These frameworks also illuminate occupational differences across higher education institutions. Women concentrated in feminised academic and support roles experience disadvantages shaped by both policy structures and institutional culture, including lower pay, restricted access to leadership positions, and the devaluation of their professional contributions (Charles & Bradley, 2002; Morley, 2013).

Building on this theoretical integration, the paper proposes that the motherhood penalty emerges through the interaction of three mutually reinforcing systems: (1) policy design, which structures formal entitlements and access to family-friendly measures; (2) cultural norms, which shape the legitimacy, perception, and uptake of these entitlements; and (3) institutional valuation systems, which determine the forms of labour that are recognised, rewarded, and promoted. This triadic model provides the analytical foundation for understanding why gender inequality persists even in contexts where formal equality measures are in place.

Gendered Occupational Segregation and the Devaluation of Feminised Roles

FIT emphasises the structural logic behind occupational segregation and the undervaluation of feminised work. Roles dominated by women, including administrative support, student services, and female-majority academic disciplines, are often devalued in terms of pay, status, and career opportunities (England, 2010; Charles & Bradley, 2002). IE demonstrates how these inequalities are reinforced in daily organisational practices, such as workload allocation, mentorship access, and informal networking.

These mechanisms converge with the motherhood penalty: women in feminised roles are more likely to access flexible work arrangements or part-time contracts to manage caregiving, yet these accommodations carry hidden costs, including reduced promotion prospects and exclusion from strategic institutional decisions (Blom et al., 2025). The theoretical framework therefore connects structural, cultural, and policy-related factors, showing how the motherhood penalty is produced and reproduced across both academic and support staff populations.

3.5 Analytical Implications for Comparative and Maltese HEIs

By combining FIT and IE, the framework provides the tools to examine not only whether family-friendly policies exist but also how they are experienced, mediated, and constrained by culture, norms, and institutional practices. This dual lens enables a comprehensive understanding of gendered inequalities across contexts, highlighting why policies that succeed in Nordic settings may have limited impact in Malta and other Southern European states. It also grounds the empirical analysis of Maltese HEIs, providing the foundation for examining:

- The gendered uptake of family-friendly measures;
- The persistence of “ideal academic” norms;
- The intersection of occupational segregation, policy, and caregiving responsibilities;
- Institutional gatekeeping and the devaluation of feminised roles.

Together, FIT and IE ensure that the subsequent findings and discussion sections address both structural and experiential dimensions of the motherhood penalty, offering actionable insights for policy reform and cultural change.

Comparative Context: The Motherhood Penalty Across Countries

Understanding the Motherhood Penalty

The motherhood penalty refers to the systematic disadvantages women encounter in labour markets and professional contexts after becoming mothers. These disadvantages manifest across multiple dimensions, including reduced wages, limited promotion opportunities, slower career progression, and exclusion from leadership positions (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007; Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020). While initially observed in the private sector, the motherhood penalty is increasingly documented in higher education institutions (HEIs), affecting both academic and support staff. Importantly, the scale and nature of the penalty are shaped not only by individual choices but also by institutional structures, policy frameworks, and cultural norms.

Cross-national comparisons reveal considerable variation in the motherhood penalty. Structural factors, such as the availability of childcare, parental leave schemes, and flexible working arrangements, interact with social and cultural expectations around gender and caregiving to produce divergent outcomes.

Career breaks for childcare, the gendered division of domestic labour, and stigma associated with policy uptake contribute to persistent inequalities, even in countries with formally supportive policies (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020; Lopes, 2024).

Nordic Countries: Mitigating the Penalty through Policy and Culture

Evidence from Nordic welfare states illustrates how the motherhood penalty can be substantially mitigated. Countries such as Sweden, Norway, and Denmark combine extensive parental leave policies, accessible and subsidised childcare, and cultural norms that support shared caregiving responsibilities (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020). These measures promote continuous labour force participation among mothers, reducing wage penalties and limiting career disruptions.

For example, in Sweden, research indicates negligible wage penalties (0–1%) for mothers, attributed to comprehensive leave schemes and social recognition of maternal employment (Gupta & Smith, 2002). Fathers' increased uptake of parental leave and flexible work arrangements reinforces egalitarian caregiving norms, reducing both the gendered division of labour and the stigma associated with balancing work and family. Institutional ethnography research further demonstrates that these policies are embedded within organisational cultures that value gender equity, thereby increasing their effectiveness in practice (Smith, 2005; Acker, 2006).

Southern European Contexts: Policy Presence but Cultural Constraints

Southern European countries, including Malta, Italy, Spain, and Greece, present a more complex picture. Policies such as parental leave and flexible working arrangements exist, but uptake is heavily gendered and cultural expectations remain conservative. Mothers continue to bear primary responsibility for caregiving, while fathers underutilise family-friendly policies due to career concerns and social norms (Central Bank of Malta, 2023; European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2024). Research from Southern Europe shows relatively small observed wage penalties in some cases due to low female labour market participation; however, these figures mask significant career interruptions, reduced working hours, and long-term disadvantages for mothers (Matysiak & Węziak-Białowolska, 2016; OECD, 2017). Within HEIs, the ideal worker norm, expecting uninterrupted availability and long hours, remains deeply

entrenched, creating additional barriers for mothers and caregivers (Orupabo et al., 2025). Consequently, while formal policies exist, their impact is limited by cultural and institutional resistance, reproducing the motherhood penalty in subtle but pervasive ways.

Anglo-Saxon and Western European Countries: Moderate Penalties and Gendered Uptake

Anglo-Saxon countries such as the UK, the US, and Australia exhibit moderate motherhood penalties, often ranging from 3–7% per child, depending on employment sector and number of children (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020). In these contexts, policies such as parental leave, part-time work, and flexible scheduling exist, but uptake remains gendered. Women disproportionately use these measures, while men rarely participate due to organisational culture and fears of career repercussions (Craig & Mullan, 2010). Evidence from HEIs in the UK indicates that women who access family-friendly policies often experience stalled career progression, reduced leadership opportunities, and lower research funding. Similarly, administrative and support staff in public sector institutions report subtle penalties for utilising flexible work arrangements, including exclusion from informal networks and limited access to professional development (Blom et al., 2025; Chung, 2022). These patterns highlight that the motherhood penalty is not simply a matter of policy availability but is strongly mediated by institutional culture and informal practices.

Central and Eastern Europe: Pronounced Penalties

The most pronounced motherhood penalties are observed in Central and Eastern European countries, where mothers may experience wage reductions of up to 14% for multiple children (Matysiak & Vignoli, 2008). Career breaks, reduced working hours, and traditional gender norms compound disadvantages, particularly for highly skilled women in both academic and non-academic roles (Davies & Pierre, 2005; Harkness & Waldfogel, 2003). Institutional ethnography research in these regions highlights how informal gatekeeping, limited access to mentoring, and narrow definitions of professional commitment reinforce penalties for caregiving. Even when family-friendly policies exist, cultural stigma and entrenched expectations of uninterrupted work reduce their effectiveness, reproducing gendered inequality across sectors (Lafférs & Schmidpeter, 2021; Lopes, 2024).

Comparative Lessons for Malta

The Maltese context combines features observed in Southern Europe with small-state characteristics that amplify the motherhood penalty. While family-friendly policies such as parental leave, flexible hours, and remote work exist, uptake remains gendered and the cultural perception of caregiving reinforces traditional roles (European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2024; European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2024). Male employees rarely utilise policies, while women who do face subtle penalties including stalled career progression, exclusion from professional networks, and social stigma.

Comparative evidence demonstrates that Malta's experience is not unique but reflects broader patterns in Southern European HEIs, where policy provision alone is insufficient to eliminate disparities. The intersection of policy, culture, and institutional norms is central to sustaining the motherhood penalty, highlighting the need for strategies that address both structural and cultural determinants of inequality. Understanding these dynamics provides the foundation for analysing family-friendly policies, occupational segregation, and gatekeeping practices in Maltese HEIs, which will be explored in the subsequent findings section.

Family-Friendly Policies and Cultural Norms

Family-friendly policies, including parental leave, flexible working hours, part-time arrangements, and remote work, are central tools for supporting caregivers in higher education institutions (HEIs). International evidence demonstrates that these policies can mitigate the motherhood penalty when they are widely accessible and culturally supported (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020). However, the effectiveness of such measures depends not only on formal policy design but also on workplace culture, uptake patterns, and the informal expectations embedded within institutional hierarchies (Craig & Mullan, 2010; Deming, 2022).

Across contexts, family-friendly policies are predominantly utilised by women, while men's uptake remains limited. In Nordic countries, gender-neutral parental leave and strong cultural norms supporting shared caregiving encourage fathers' participation, reducing gendered career penalties and promoting equality (Gupta & Smith, 2002; Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020). In contrast, Anglo-Saxon and Southern European systems demonstrate

highly gendered uptake: women disproportionately access flexible work arrangements, while men often avoid them due to perceived career risks or cultural expectations of male breadwinning (Central Bank of Malta, 2023; European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2024). In Malta, these patterns are pronounced. Studies indicate that male employees rarely utilise family-friendly policies, perceiving flexible working as incompatible with professional ambition and subject to peer or managerial judgment (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2024; European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2024). Women who do take advantage of such measures frequently experience stalled career progression, limited access to research opportunities, and subtle stigmatisation from colleagues and supervisors. This dynamic reflects a broader cultural expectation that caregiving is primarily a female responsibility, reinforcing gendered occupational norms and sustaining the motherhood penalty even when formal policies exist (Orupabo et al., 2025; Chung, 2022).

Institutional ethnography (IE) research highlights how these gendered patterns are embedded in daily organisational practices. While policies provide formal entitlements, informal norms, expectations, and gatekeeping mechanisms often undermine their uptake. Supervisors and committees may unconsciously penalise employees who take leave or request flexibility, associating caregiving with lower professional commitment (Schober & Büchau, 2022; Agius Tabone, 2026). Women in administrative or support roles are particularly vulnerable, as these positions are already feminised, undervalued, and less visible within institutional hierarchies (Charles & Bradley, 2002; Morley, 2013).

The interplay of policy and culture is further complicated by small-state dynamics in Malta. Close-knit institutional networks and limited staff numbers can amplify peer scrutiny, increasing the perceived risk for men to utilise family-friendly measures and heightening the visibility of women's caregiving decisions (European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2024). Consequently, formal policies designed to promote equity may inadvertently reinforce gendered divisions if organisational culture remains unchanged.

Comparative evidence underscores that formal policy availability alone is insufficient. In Anglo-Saxon HEIs, flexible work arrangements are similarly underutilised by men, and women who engage with them face long-term penalties in promotion, leadership opportunities, and research productivity

(Wer Chung, 2022; Thomas & Robinson, 2023). These findings suggest that the motherhood penalty persists not only due to policy gaps but also because of entrenched cultural norms around work, caregiving, and professional commitment.

Addressing these dynamics requires strategies that integrate policy reform with cultural change. Gender mainstreaming initiatives, which embed gender perspectives into institutional planning and performance evaluation, can normalise caregiving for all staff and reduce stigma (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2016; European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2026). Mentoring and professional support networks, particularly those that involve male allies, can further reinforce the legitimacy of flexible work and equitable caregiving responsibilities (Rinfret et al., 2023; Meza-Mejía, Villarreal-García, & Ortega-Barba, 2023). Finally, framing family-friendly policies as benefits for all staff, rather than exceptions for mothers, is crucial for reducing gendered uptake and mitigating career penalties (Earle et al., 2025; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000).

In summary, the intersection of family-friendly policies and cultural norms is central to understanding the motherhood penalty in higher education. While formal entitlements exist, particularly in contexts such as Malta, gendered uptake and workplace stigma limit their effectiveness. International and Maltese evidence consistently shows that without cultural support, the benefits of flexible work and parental leave are unevenly distributed, reinforcing gendered occupational hierarchies and the disadvantages faced by mothers and caregivers. Policy reform, cultural change, and institutional accountability must work in tandem to achieve meaningful equity.

The Ideal Academic and Institutional Gatekeeping

The concept of the “ideal academic” is central to understanding the persistence of gender inequalities within higher education institutions (HEIs). Rooted in longstanding organisational norms, the ideal academic is characterised by uninterrupted career trajectories, long working hours, high mobility, and constant availability (O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Orupabo et al., 2025). More fundamentally, the persistence of the motherhood penalty reflects underlying power structures that shape whose work is valued and whose careers are prioritised within academia. Institutional regimes continue to privilege forms of labour traditionally associated with masculinity, such as autonomy, productivity, and uninterrupted availability, while devaluing labour

associated with caregiving, support, and relational work. This hierarchy is not gender-neutral; rather, it reflects broader gendered power relations embedded within academic institutions.

Although these expectations may appear formally neutral within institutional policies, they are deeply gendered in practice. They tend to privilege individuals without substantial caregiving responsibilities, most often men, while disadvantaging mothers and other caregivers (Acker, 2006; Bird, 2011). As a result, professional commitment and academic excellence are frequently assessed according to standards that implicitly assume freedom from domestic and caregiving obligations.

Institutional gatekeeping reinforces these norms. Gatekeepers, supervisors, promotion committees, and senior colleagues, implicitly evaluate commitment and productivity through the lens of continuous, full-time work. Women who take career breaks, request flexible hours, or engage in part-time arrangements often encounter subtle biases, including exclusion from key networks, diminished visibility, and reduced access to high-status assignments (Mantai & Marrone, 2023; Agius Tabone, 2026). These informal mechanisms complement formal policies, producing compounded disadvantages even when family-friendly measures exist.

International research illustrates that gatekeeping is not unique to any one context. In Anglo-Saxon HEIs, women who utilise flexible work arrangements frequently face stalled career progression, lower research funding, and limited leadership opportunities, despite legal entitlements to parental leave (Agius Tabone, 2026; Thomas & Robinson, 2023). Similarly, in Central and Eastern Europe, cultural norms favour uninterrupted careers, penalising mothers who engage with family-friendly policies through slower promotion and reputational consequences (Matysiak & Vignoli, 2008; Lafférs & Schmidpeter, 2021). These findings demonstrate that formal policies alone cannot offset entrenched organisational expectations.

The Maltese context exemplifies how institutional gatekeeping intersects with cultural norms to reinforce gendered disadvantage. Male employees rarely access flexible work or parental leave due to perceived career risks and social stigma, reinforcing the expectation that caregiving is primarily a female responsibility (European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2024; Central Bank of Malta, 2023). Women who engage with

family-friendly policies face informal penalties, including exclusion from research collaborations, reduced visibility in decision-making forums, and perceptions of lower commitment (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2024; Chung, 2022). Within HEIs, these dynamics are further exacerbated by small institutional networks, where peer scrutiny and managerial oversight are highly visible, intensifying the consequences of deviations from the ideal worker norm.

Institutional ethnography provides insight into how these processes operate on a day-to-day basis. Policies are not enacted in isolation; they intersect with evaluative practices, mentoring structures, and informal communication networks. For example, early-career researchers on fixed-term contracts are particularly vulnerable to gatekeeping, as they rely on endorsements from supervisors and committees to secure promotion or permanent positions (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Minor deviations from normative expectations, such as taking parental leave or part-time work, can disproportionately affect women in these positions, amplifying career disadvantages and reinforcing the motherhood penalty (Chellappa, 2023).

Gatekeeping is also shaped by intersectional factors, including discipline, contract type, and caregiving responsibilities. Female-dominated fields, such as education and the humanities, often experience less prestige and fewer resources, compounding the impact of caregiving-related career interruptions (Charles & Bradley, 2002; Morley, 2013). Similarly, support and administrative staff in feminised roles face barriers to career advancement when using family-friendly policies, as institutional recognition and reward systems prioritise uninterrupted academic productivity. This intersection of gendered roles and institutional expectations creates a structural environment in which the motherhood penalty is reproduced across multiple occupational groups.

Addressing gatekeeping and the ideal academic norm requires both policy and cultural interventions. Recommendations include reframing family-friendly policies as normative and beneficial for all employees, promoting male uptake of flexible work arrangements, and redefining academic success to recognise diverse career trajectories and caregiving responsibilities (Rosa & Clavero, 2022; Earle et al., 2025). Leadership endorsement of flexible career pathways legitimises non-linear professional trajectories and signals institutional commitment to gender equity (Lagesen & Suboticki, 2024; Ely et al., 2011). Mentoring programs, particularly those that engage senior staff and male allies, can counteract informal biases, increase visibility, and support women's

career progression, mitigating the effects of gatekeeping (Rinfret et al., 2023; Meza-Mejía, Villarreal-García, & Ortega-Barba, 2023).

In conclusion, the ideal academic norm and associated gatekeeping mechanisms are central drivers of the motherhood penalty within HEIs. Even in the presence of family-friendly policies, institutional expectations and informal evaluation practices disadvantage mothers and caregivers, particularly in small or highly networked contexts such as Malta. Combating these entrenched norms requires a combination of cultural change, leadership commitment, and policy reform that collectively redefines professional commitment, normalises caregiving responsibilities, and promotes equitable career outcomes for all staff.

Feminised Sectors & Occupational Segregation

Gendered occupational segregation remains one of the most persistent mechanisms sustaining inequality in higher education institutions (HEIs). Women are disproportionately concentrated in administrative, student services, and female-majority academic disciplines such as education, social sciences, and the humanities, while men dominate STEM fields, research-intensive positions, and senior leadership roles (Aiston & Jung, 2015; UNESCO, 2023). This segregation manifests both horizontally, across disciplines and occupational categories, and vertically, within hierarchical structures, creating layered disadvantages that reinforce the motherhood penalty.

Horizontal segregation is evident in the overrepresentation of women in roles that are essential for institutional functioning but carry lower prestige and remuneration. Administrative support, student services, and human resources are largely staffed by women and are often undervalued despite their critical contribution to organisational effectiveness (Charles & Bradley, 2002). Similarly, female-dominated academic disciplines tend to receive less research funding, are prioritised lower in strategic planning, and are more likely to rely on fixed-term or casual contracts (University of New South Wales, 2023). This structural undervaluation exemplifies the “devaluation of female-dominated work,” whereby the gender composition of a role shapes its perceived worth and limits career advancement opportunities (England, 2010).

Vertical segregation compounds these disadvantages. Men are overrepresented in senior academic positions, tenured roles, and institutional leadership, whereas women cluster in teaching-focused, part-time, or lower-

status administrative positions (Rosa & Clavero, 2022; Northumbria University, 2024). Even when women achieve representation, it is often concentrated in roles that do not confer the same power, influence, or financial reward, perpetuating inequalities despite overall gender parity in numbers. Feminised sectors are also characterised by high levels of part-time employment and fixed-term contracts. While these arrangements are frequently framed as flexible or family-friendly, they carry long-term disadvantages. Women in such positions may experience limited promotion opportunities, reduced pension eligibility, and increased financial insecurity. For academic mothers, part-time contracts can restrict access to research funding and leadership roles, while for support staff, career progression is often contingent on visibility, network inclusion, and sustained institutional commitment, factors constrained by caregiving responsibilities (Morley, 2013).

The intersection of feminisation and the motherhood penalty is particularly pronounced. Women in feminised sectors disproportionately access flexible working arrangements, parental leave, and career breaks to manage caregiving responsibilities (Mason, Goulden, & Frasch, 2009). While these measures are intended to support work-life balance, they often carry hidden costs. Women may be perceived as less committed, miss out on professional development opportunities, or be excluded from leadership trajectories (Blom et al., 2025). Consequently, structural and cultural factors converge to reproduce gendered disadvantage across both academic and support staff roles.

Maltese HEIs reflect these global patterns. Women dominate administrative and support functions as well as teaching-focused or female-majority academic disciplines, yet these roles are undervalued within institutional hierarchies (European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2024; European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2024). Men, conversely, are concentrated in research-intensive, STEM, and leadership positions, benefitting from higher pay, prestige, and career stability. The persistence of the ideal academic norm, prioritising uninterrupted, full-time work, further marginalises women who assume caregiving responsibilities, reinforcing occupational stratification and limiting upward mobility (Orupabo et al., 2025).

Institutional culture interacts with policy to shape these outcomes. Although flexible working and parental leave are formally available, women in feminised sectors face subtle penalties for their use, including exclusion from professional networks, lower visibility in promotion processes, and negative perceptions of

commitment (Chung, 2022; Agius Tabone, 2026). Men rarely utilise these policies, leaving caregiving largely feminised and perpetuating structural inequality. These dynamics highlight that gendered occupational segregation is not merely a reflection of personal choice but a consequence of institutional practices, evaluative norms, and cultural expectations that reinforce the motherhood penalty.

Addressing occupational segregation and its consequences requires a dual approach: elevating the value of feminised roles and ensuring equitable access to leadership opportunities. Institutional interventions may include targeted mentorship, equitable resource allocation across disciplines, and policies that normalise caregiving for all staff (Rinfret et al., 2023; Ely et al., 2011). Recognising the essential contributions of administrative and female-majority academic roles, alongside active strategies to mitigate bias in promotion and resource distribution, is crucial for dismantling structural inequalities.

In conclusion, gendered occupational segregation operates as a fundamental mechanism sustaining the motherhood penalty in HEIs. The concentration of women in undervalued, feminised roles, coupled with cultural expectations surrounding the ideal academic and caregiving responsibilities, perpetuates systemic disadvantage. Addressing these structural inequalities requires integrated cultural and policy interventions that elevate the status of feminised work, promote equitable career progression, and normalise caregiving responsibilities across genders and occupational categories.

Discussion

This discussion moves beyond descriptive synthesis to provide a critical interpretation of the findings, positioning the Maltese case as an analytically significant example for understanding the structural persistence of the motherhood penalty within higher education institutions (HEIs). In doing so, it addresses not only how gender inequality operates, but also why it remains resistant to change despite the expansion of formal equality measures.

This study examined the motherhood penalty across both academic and support staff within HEIs, with particular emphasis on the Maltese context. Drawing on feminist institutionalism and institutional ethnography, the analysis demonstrates that gendered inequalities persist through the interaction of institutional norms, cultural expectations, and occupational structures, even where family-friendly policies formally exist. By integrating the Maltese case with international comparative evidence, the discussion

highlights the mechanisms through which the motherhood penalty is reproduced and considers their implications for institutional policy and practice.

A central finding of this study is that formal policy provision alone is insufficient to dismantle gendered disadvantage. Family-friendly measures, including parental leave, flexible working arrangements, part-time contracts, and remote work, are formally available in most HEIs and legally protected within Malta. However, their uptake remains highly gendered, with men rarely utilising such measures and women frequently experiencing social, professional, and financial penalties for doing so (European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2024; European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2024). These findings reflect broader international patterns identified within Anglo-Saxon and Southern European contexts, where cultural expectations surrounding male breadwinning and female caregiving continue to undermine the effectiveness of family-friendly policies (Craig & Mullan, 2010; Earle et al., 2025).

Importantly, these findings suggest that the persistence of the motherhood penalty cannot be understood simply as a failure of policy implementation. Rather, it reflects deeper institutional structures and systems of valuation that continue to reward uninterrupted productivity, constant availability, and research-intensive career trajectories, while devaluing relational, administrative, and care-oriented labour. Consequently, even well-designed equality measures remain constrained by institutional cultures and evaluative frameworks that reproduce gendered inequalities.

In contrast, evidence from Nordic countries demonstrates that the motherhood penalty can be substantially reduced when supportive policies are combined with more egalitarian cultural norms and higher levels of male participation in caregiving responsibilities (Gupta & Smith, 2002; Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020). These cases illustrate that policy effectiveness depends not only on formal provision, but also on the extent to which institutional cultures normalise caregiving and challenge gendered assumptions surrounding work, productivity, and professional commitment.

The concept of the “ideal academic” further explains why formal entitlements often fail to produce equitable outcomes. Institutional expectations of uninterrupted, full-time work, high mobility, and constant availability

systematically disadvantage caregivers, particularly mothers, across academic and non-academic roles (O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Orupabo et al., 2025). Gatekeeping practices, through promotion committees, supervisory evaluations, and informal networks, reinforce these norms, creating subtle yet persistent barriers to career progression (Mantai & Marrone, 2023; Agius Tabone, 2026). Women who take career breaks or use flexible arrangements frequently experience stalled advancement, exclusion from decision-making, and reduced research opportunities, demonstrating the interplay between policy, culture, and practice in reproducing inequality.

Occupational segregation amplifies these dynamics. Women are concentrated in feminised sectors, including administrative staff, student services, human resources, and female-majority academic disciplines, that are undervalued, undercompensated, and characterised by part-time or fixed-term contracts (Charles & Bradley, 2002; Morley, 2013). These roles provide essential institutional functions yet offer limited visibility, prestige, and career progression, reinforcing the motherhood penalty. In Malta, this pattern is evident across both academic and support staff: male employees dominate research-intensive and senior leadership positions, while women in feminised sectors face both structural and cultural barriers to advancement (European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2024; European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2024).

The intersection of policy, culture, and occupational structure highlights the limitations of treating the motherhood penalty solely as a policy issue. Feminist institutionalism emphasises that institutions embed gendered assumptions within both formal and informal practices, shaping outcomes for men and women in unequal ways (Acker, 2006). Institutional ethnography complements this perspective by illustrating how these assumptions are reproduced and experienced within everyday working practices, revealing the subtle mechanisms, such as stigma, exclusion, and the devaluation of care-related labour, through which gendered inequalities persist (Smith, 2005). Together, these frameworks demonstrate why formal equality in policy provision does not necessarily translate into substantive equality in practice.

The use of feminist institutionalism and institutional ethnography is therefore not merely theoretical but reflects a broader epistemological commitment to understanding institutions as key sites of social reproduction and, consequently, potential sites of transformative change. By examining how

inequality becomes embedded within institutional structures, evaluative systems, and everyday organisational practices, the paper highlights the capacity of institutional reform to generate broader social change beyond the boundaries of the workplace itself.

These insights carry important implications for both policy and practice. They also raise a broader normative question regarding the responsibility of the University of Malta as the country's primary higher education institution. As the sole public university within a small-state context, the institution occupies a structurally influential position not only as a major employer, but also as a national standard-setter in relation to labour practices, organisational culture, and gender equality. This places the University in a unique position, and arguably creates a corresponding institutional responsibility, to act as a model for gender equity by demonstrating how organisational change can extend beyond institutional boundaries and contribute to wider societal transformation.

First, gender mainstreaming and intersectional approaches are essential to ensure that policies address the experiences of all staff, including support and administrative roles, not just academics (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2016; European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2022). Second, cultural interventions, such as reframing family-friendly policies as normative for all employees, actively promoting male uptake, and redefining academic success to value diverse career trajectories, are crucial to reducing stigma and gatekeeping (Rosa & Clavero, 2022; Earle et al., 2025). Third, structural reforms that elevate the status of feminised roles, provide equitable access to resources, and support mentorship across genders and occupational categories can mitigate the compounding effects of occupational segregation and caregiving responsibilities (Rinfret et al., 2023; Ely et al., 2011).

Finally, the comparative perspective underscores the importance of context in shaping the motherhood penalty. Malta shares features with Southern European systems, including conservative gender norms, limited male participation in caregiving, and small institutional networks that amplify peer scrutiny (European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2024; Central Bank of Malta, 2023). Lessons from Nordic and Anglo-Saxon contexts suggest that effective interventions require integrated strategies: robust policy provision, cultural normalisation of caregiving, and institutional accountability mechanisms to ensure equitable outcomes. Such

approaches must be intersectional, addressing how gender interacts with role, discipline, contract type, and caregiving responsibilities to produce complex patterns of disadvantage.

In summary, the motherhood penalty in HEIs is a multifaceted phenomenon sustained by the interaction of policy, culture, and occupational structure. Formal family-friendly measures provide necessary but insufficient support; institutional expectations, gatekeeping practices, and occupational segregation continue to disadvantage mothers and other caregivers. Addressing these inequities requires holistic strategies that combine policy, cultural change, and structural reform, recognising the diverse experiences of academic and support staff and challenging entrenched norms around productivity, availability, and career trajectories.

Conclusion

This paper examined the motherhood penalty within higher education institutions (HEIs), focusing on both academic and support staff, while positioning Malta within a broader international comparative context. By conceptualising Malta as a small-state case, the paper contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating how institutional scale, organisational concentration, and cultural proximity can intensify the motherhood penalty. In doing so, the analysis shifts attention away from the mere presence of family-friendly policies toward the deeper institutional dynamics through which inequality is reproduced, exposing the limitations of equality frameworks that fail to address underlying systems of value, recognition, and power.

The findings demonstrate that gendered inequalities persist despite the formal availability of family-friendly measures because of the interaction between cultural norms, institutional expectations, and occupational segregation. Although policies such as flexible working arrangements, parental leave, and part-time employment formally exist, they do not automatically produce equitable outcomes. Informal practices, organisational cultures, and evaluative systems continue to disadvantage mothers and other caregivers, reinforcing unequal patterns of career progression, visibility, and professional recognition.

Three central insights emerge from this study. First, the uptake of family-friendly policies remains highly gendered. Women disproportionately utilise flexible working arrangements, parental leave, and part-time contracts, while men rarely access these entitlements because of persistent cultural expectations

surrounding masculinity, breadwinning, and perceived career risks. International comparisons indicate that in Nordic contexts, where caregiving responsibilities are more equally shared and male uptake of family-friendly measures is normalised, the motherhood penalty is significantly reduced. In contrast, Malta, like many Southern European contexts, continues to reproduce traditional gender norms that associate caregiving primarily with women, thereby limiting the effectiveness of formal policy provision and contributing to stalled career progression for female employees (European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2024; Central Bank of Malta, 2023).

The Maltese case further illustrates how small-state dynamics intensify these processes. The concentration of higher education within a single national institution, combined with dense professional and social networks, increases visibility, amplifies informal surveillance, and heightens the perceived risks associated with deviating from normative career trajectories. Within this context, institutional culture operates not as a diffuse system, but as a highly concentrated and visible structure in which resistance to gendered expectations becomes more difficult and the consequences of deviation more immediate.

Second, the ideal academic norm and institutional gatekeeping perpetuate inequality. Expectations of uninterrupted, full-time work, constant availability, and high mobility privilege those without caregiving responsibilities and systematically disadvantage mothers. Gatekeeping mechanisms, through promotions, supervisory evaluations, and informal networks, enforce these norms, resulting in reduced visibility, lower research funding, and limited leadership opportunities for women who engage with family-friendly policies. These dynamics are observed across both academic and support staff, demonstrating that structural and cultural barriers intersect to sustain the motherhood penalty (O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Orupabo et al., 2025; Agius Tabone, 2026).

Third, gendered occupational segregation amplifies disadvantage. Women are concentrated in feminised roles, including administrative functions, student services, and female-majority academic disciplines, that are undervalued, undercompensated, and characterised by part-time or fixed-term employment. These roles, while essential to institutional functioning, offer limited career progression, prestige, and financial security. The intersection of feminisation and caregiving responsibilities further entrenches systemic inequalities, as

women in these positions face compounded penalties for engaging with flexible work and parental leave (Charles & Bradley, 2002; Blom et al., 2025).

Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of integrating policy, cultural, and structural interventions. Gender mainstreaming, inclusive mentoring, reframing family-friendly policies as normative for all staff and elevating the status of feminised roles are critical strategies for mitigating the motherhood penalty. Leadership commitment, transparent accountability mechanisms, and intersectional approaches are essential to ensure that interventions address the experiences of diverse staff groups, including non-academic employees who are often overlooked in scholarly analyses.

Ultimately, achieving gender equity within higher education institutions requires far more than the formal provision of family-friendly policies. It demands a broader cultural transformation that normalises caregiving responsibilities across genders, challenges entrenched constructions of the “ideal academic,” and recognises the value of diverse forms of institutional labour and contribution. By situating Malta within an international comparative framework, this paper demonstrates how the motherhood penalty emerges through the interaction of global policy discourses, local cultural norms, and institutional practices. In doing so, it highlights the motherhood penalty as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by structural, cultural, and policy-related factors.

Addressing these inequalities therefore requires holistic and intersectional approaches that extend beyond policy reform alone. Meaningful change depends upon transforming organisational cultures, evaluative systems, and institutional expectations in ways that support equitable career opportunities and reduce systemic disadvantages experienced by mothers and caregivers across the higher education workforce. Ultimately, this paper argues that confronting the motherhood penalty requires a fundamental rethinking of how higher education institutions define merit, productivity, and professional success, moving beyond policy compliance toward the structural transformation of academic and institutional cultures.

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