

Home Economics 3.0: A Critical Update

As the theme for the XXV congress of the IFHE in Ireland 2024 gets to the heart of the matter, we and Home Economics live in a “Time of Transformation”. Home Economics are in the need of a critical update to fully unfold its potentials and to “Bridge the Past” and “Chart the Future”. Just as every computer needs an operating system so that users can work with it, every institution in which people are cared for needs a functioning housekeeping system - a housekeeping operating system. And every operating system needs updates - so does home economics.

Economy is Care

Fresh laundry, the table set, a clean bathroom - both private and professional home economics are an essential foundation for quality of life and well-being. For everyone, unpaid care-work only becomes visible when it is not done. The diverse and also fulfilling work of caring for and looking after everyone's needs often goes unnoticed and is performed underpaid or unpaid, predominantly by women. Yet domestic and reproductive work is the basis and prerequisite for all other areas of social life and represents the foundation of the national economy. In other words: No economy without home economics or "economy is care". This means that people must first be cared for in households in order to be able to develop and contribute their skills, for example, at school or in gainful employment.

Resilience is needed

In times of multiple crises and profound societal changes, reliable household care systems are more than ever a prerequisite for a resilient society. High-quality domestic services and home economics education strengthen people to master their own lives and to cope with future crises. Thus, people and societies become more resilient through home economics and home economics education. Home economics competence is a keyfactor to social justice and a means of shaping social transformation. However, home economics itself must also face major social transformation processes: Demographic change and the associated shortage of skilled workers, digitalization and increasing scarcity of resources are acute challenges that home economics must meet. Promoting resilience requires resilience.

A home economics sector that can withstand crises knows how to use its potential. Broad competencies, diversity and flexibility are specific strengths of the home economics sector that need to be developed. Appreciation, fair wages, successful inclusion of international and generally diverse workers, and up-to-date training initiatives are essential starting points for attracting and retaining the most important resource of the home economics industry: satisfied employees.

Diversity is the name of the game

The current, not crisis-free, era also offers many opportunities. Our society is becoming more colorful, more diverse and more multifaceted - the home economics community must also adapt to this at all levels. Diversity management is an integral part of educational institutions as well as of the institutions in which home economics is practiced. Diversity must be seen as

an opportunity, even if this means leaving familiar paths behind and adopting new perspectives. The new challenges and the "unusual" deserve appreciation. This already begins in education in the field of home economics and in inclusion-oriented teacher training. Vocational language promotion, language-sensitive teaching and easy language must be lived. The Gemeinnützige Frankfurter Frauen-Beschäftigungsgesellschaft (GFFB) offers a "best practice" example of how this can succeed. Modular (partial) qualifications and the recognition of informally and non-formally acquired competencies will play an increasingly important role. Existing innovative approaches must be made known and established among educational institutions and other players. Demographic change and the worsening shortage of skilled workers do not permit "business as usual". The Diversity Charter formulates principles for promoting the recognition, appreciation and inclusion of diversity in the world of work and for increasing the attractiveness of a profession through participation.

Into the future with digitization

Digitization has fundamentally changed all areas of our lives in recent years, and home economics is no exception to this megatrend. By automating routine tasks, workflows can be made more effective, leaving more time for personal attention. Smart household appliances can optimize energy and water consumption and reduce workload. In private households and home services, for instance, improved monitoring of resource consumption can optimize the consumption of water, food, and other resources. Additionally, smart tools and platforms can improve overall household organization.

As in other sectors, the home economics sector needs to introduce appropriate measures for data protection and security to protect personal data. However, it should not be overlooked that there are structural inequities in regard to access to resources and technologies. Users often lack knowledge about the benefits and advantages of new technologies, digital and media skills, and the necessary financial resources. For a successful digital transformation, it is necessary to enable the participation of all household members in all social groups. In particular, older people and those with low levels of digital literacy should be supported to use new technologies. Education, training and support programs must be developed to promote digital participation and break down barriers. It is also important to integrate competencies in the latest digital applications in home economics training. Similarly, the widespread availability of permanent Internet connections and affordable digital devices in facilities will be a prerequisite for the integration of digitization in home economics as well.

Despite all the digitization, the human aspect of home economics must not be neglected. Digital solutions should be used as a supplement, to support and facilitate work, but not to replace personal contact, interaction and social contacts. Therefore, digital transformations will strengthen home economics, but will not be a substitute for personal care and social interaction.

Sufficiency-based behavior as a strategy for the future

In order to meet the current challenges, not only technical solutions, but also behavioral changes offer great potential. The transformation to a resilient and climate-neutral society will not succeed without a significant reorientation of our approach to prosperity. The nearly

41 million private households in Germany – and so many other households of the global consumer class - could reduce their consumption of resources by 20 to 30 percent without any significant loss in lifestyle. A huge potential!

What is needed is a sufficiency-oriented behavior aware of "limitations" instead of the "ever more". This does not mean suffering. So far the idea of doing with less triggers fears and resistance. Sufficiency instead is about letting go the burdens of material entitlement - both personal and societal - in favor of more care and concern for people, the environment and objects. For such serious changes, a social rethinking and a variety of political measures are needed. The "Deutschlandticket", for example, a ticket which allows to travel all through Germany for 49€ a month, is a first step in the mobility revolution. In the area of housing, there needs to be a social discussion how to bring a hold on the ever increasing size of per capita living space. All in all it can be helpful to think in terms of "consumption corridors". In this concept, consumption minima are defined as a lower limit enabling everyone to live a good life based on secure basic supply of the important goods needed. With the formulation of consumption maxima, however, consumption corridors also provide clear orientation as to when individual consumption exceeds ecological as well as social justice criteria.

Home economics and household science have the position to be on the forefront of preparing families and households for the fact that the current resource-based standard of living will not last and to take away their fear of change. Institutional home economics needs to position itself to provide the best possible care and support for people in the future.

What is also needed is the nationwide expansion of specialized home economics institutions that bundle competencies and make them available. Training associations and training cooperations can also play an important role in driving innovation. There are some light-house projects, but they need to be made permanent. In order to generate and further develop the necessary expertise, it is also necessary to strengthen and revitalize Home Economics research and teaching at universities. The structural deconstruction of Home Economics at universities in Germany must be stopped.

The authors:

Gabi Bötties is a lecturer in Ökotrophologie (Nutritional Science and Home Economics) at the Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences and vice-chair of the German section of the International Federation for Home Economics.

Beatrix Flatt is a freelance journalist and Chair of the German Section of the International Federation for Home Economics.

Angela Häußler is Professor of Everyday Culture and its Didactics at the Heidelberg University of Education.

Catherina Jansen is a research associate at the Center for Nutrition, Food and Sustainable Supply Systems at Fulda University of Applied Sciences.

Wilhelmine Kalle is a Research Scientist at the FZI Research Center for Information Technology in Karlsruhe.

Nina Klünder is University Professor for Socioeconomics of Private Households at the University of Paderborn.

Sylvia Lorek is Adjunct Professor at the University of Helsinki and Chair of the Sustainable Europe Research Institute, Germany.

Melanie Speck is Professor at the Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences for Socioeconomics in Households and Businesses and Senior Researcher at the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment, Energy.

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