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The Development of Home Economics as a Field of Knowledge and its Contribution to the Education and Social Status of Women

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Abstract • Denmark underwent major changes in the 1800s and the first part of the 1900s, which affected the role of education in the lives of women. Until then, women in Denmark had primarily worked as homemakers with few academic opportunities; but from the early 1900s, home economics developed as a field of knowledge, and several schools of home economics appeared across the country. Several factors contributed to and influenced this development. Focusing on the period 1890–1940, which was particularly important to the development of this knowledge field in Denmark, we consider the interests promoting the growth of this field of knowledge, its educational content, and the contradictory meaning it had for the social status of women. On the one hand, the development of home economics contributed to turning home duties into an educational and occupational area, preparing for a welfare state making the private sphere a public matter. On the other hand, it tied women to the private sphere and prevented their influence in the public sphere.

Keywords • schools of home economics, knowledge development, gender, history of education, biopolitics, biopower, discourse, discipline

Introduction

Knowledge can take many forms that can be linked to different degrees of recognition, status, and education. Thus, knowledge and education relate to power and social structures that can increase the status of professions and the people working within them. Around the mid-nineteenth century, societal changes throughout the Western world formed the background for the development of home economics as a field of knowledge. 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.[1] In its early development in Denmark and in relation to schooling, one of the proponents of home economics stated that:

> Home economics concerns the greatest of all things: to make a home. And there is hardly anyone who would think that a woman could be too skilled, too great, or too noble for that. It is not only her taking care of keeping things tidy and her sense of '*hygge*', but her being also skilled in the kitchen and in relation to all domestic work that marks the home.[2]

The quote indicates the importance attributed to home economics at the time, (e.g., being considered a woman's "calling" and having skills connected to femininity and

1 Jette Benn, "Home Economics in Past and Present: Perspectives for the Future," in *Creating Home Economics Futures: The Next 100 Years*, ed. Donna Pendergast, Sue LT McGregor, and Kaija Turkki (Bowen Hills: Australian Academic Press, 2012), 52–61.

2 Eline Eriksen, "Hvad er Husholdning?" *Husholdningsbladet*, no. 1 (1902), 4.

women) and indefinite characteristics of "all domestic work". This calls for further investigation of the history and educational meaning of home economics.

The transition of Western societies to democratic forms of government influenced power structures and had some initial influence on the position and roles of women in the family and society – women's struggle for liberation and equality accelerated. Labour markets were changing, farming was influenced by technological conquests, new industries developed, and knowledge in the field of health and nutrition was expanding.[3] Thus, the context and preconditions for the development of home economics as an academic field of knowledge had been established. In Denmark, this development accelerated with the establishment of numerous schools of home economics in the period from 1890 to 1940. This provided new educational opportunities for many women, for whom schooling beyond the age of 14 was rare.

Within the predominantly male occupations of farming and trades, formal training and higher education had already been established. Thus, the first technical schools were established in the early 1800s[4] and the Royal Danish Veterinary and Agricultural High School in the middle of the 19th century.[5] Education and knowledge contributed to giving these occupations a higher status and developing them as fields of knowledge.

Until the late 1800s, there had been little formal education targeting girls and women in the rural areas of the country. The knowledge required for keeping homes and taking care of children's upbringing did not generally have the character of institutionalized knowledge but was primarily disseminated through informal training. This contributed to women being seen and seeing themselves as inferior to the position of men in society.

However, several factors and actors contributed to the emergence and development of home economics as a field of knowledge. This development enjoyed support and influence – in Denmark as well as in the other Nordic countries – through contemporary ideas of "education for all".[6] It included social and economic phenomena that gave rise to ideas and initiatives of the nascent welfare state supporting a healthy population and a stable workforce, and thus low costs for the public budget for social and health care.[7] The ideas and initiatives merged with ideas

3 Rebecca Rogers, "Learning to be Good Girls and Women. Education, Training, and Schools," in *The Routledge History of Women in Europe since 1700*, ed. Deborah Simonton (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 93–133; Jette Benn, *Fra kvindelig husgerning over hjemkundskab til madkundskab. Historie, filosofi og didaktik* (Copenhagen: U Press, 2016); Karin Lützen, "The Cult of Domesticity in Danish Women's Philanthropy, 1870–1920," in *Gender and Vocation. Women, Religion, and Social Change in the Nordic Countries, 1830–1940*, ed. Pirjo Markkola, Study Historica no. 64. (Helsinki: SKS. 2000), 147–76.

4 Ole Karmark and Morten Piil Hansen, *Skoleeksempler. Uddannelsesstyrelsens temahæfteserie nr. 29* (Copenhagen: Undervisningsministeriet, 2001), 91.

5 Henrik Carl Bang Bendz, *Den Kongelige Veterinær- og Landbohøjskoles oprettelse 1856–1858: en dagbog* (Copenhagen: Kandrups bogtrykkeri, 1992).

6 Susanne Wiborg, *Uddannelse og social samhørighed. Udviklingen af enhedsskoler i Skandinavien, Tyskland og England. En komparativ analyse* (Copenhagen: Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitet, 2005). Alfred Oftedal Telhaug, "The Nordic Model in Education: Education as part of the political system in the last 50 years," *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 50, no. 3 (2006), 245–83.

7 Helga Hernes, *Welfare State and Woman Power: Essays in State Feminism* (Oslo: Oslo University Press, 1987); Toni Liversage, *Kvinden og historien. Kønsroller og familiemønstre i økonomisk betydning* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1972).

of the Danish folk high school movement, in which education and "enlightenment" played key parts.[8]

The home economics movement emerged as a multifaceted argument for an area of knowledge that could provide education for women as well as better health for the population. The educational institutions of home economics became very popular in Denmark. One might say that women's agency in relation to education in this area was influenced by the struggle for recognition of their occupations and knowledge and, at the same time, also itself influenced women's social status as citizens in a modern democratic society.

The movement could be considered as contradictory, since it on the one hand contributed to turning home duties into an educational and occupational area, preparing for a welfare state making the private sphere a public matter – underlining the close relationship between power and knowledge and between the exercise of power and of freedom. On the other hand, in linking home economics so strongly to women, it was tying them closely to the private sphere and thus preventing their influence in the public sphere.[9]

Focusing on the establishment of schools of home economics in Denmark during the period 1890–1940, we aim to answer the questions: *Why did home economics develop as a field of knowledge and what did education within this field mean for the social status of women?* To explore and answer these questions, we approach the analysis through the following steps and questions: Firstly, we identify societal changes and actors that contributed to establishing schools of home economics, their interests, and the underlying discourses, and which curricular content was emphasised at the schools of home economics. Connecting knowledge with interests and power, we then move on to the question concerning women's education and social status. As part of this, we consider how the schools of home economics contributed to women's education and social status by emphasising certain disciplining functions.

The methodology will be outlined in the following, where we also state the sources for the analysis.

Epistemological approach to knowledge and power

In asking why home economics developed as a field of knowledge, we aim to identify the underlying rationalities and power relations for this development. This means that our analysis has its departure in a post-structural thinking of discourses and power, which, drawing on Foucault, aims to examine contradictions and what is privileged in relation to something else. It emphasises the close relationship between power and a particular knowledge, which is conceptualised as biopower.

From the 17th century, this new means of power developed and the biopower took two forms: *disciplining* of the individual body and *regulation* of the population's life processes.[10] The disciplining of the body means optimising its resources and making

8 Palle Rasmussen, "The Folk High School," in *Learning with Adults. International Issues in Adult Education*, ed. Peter Mayo (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2013), 219–28.

9 Karin Lützen, "The Cult of Domesticity in Danish Women's Philanthropy, 1870–1920," in *Gender and Vocation. Women, Religion, and Social Change in the Nordic Countries, 1830–1940*, ed. Pirjo Markkola, Study Historica no. 64. (Helsinki: SKS. 2000), 147–76.

10 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1* (London: Penguin, 1978).

it more useful, productive, and obedient. The regulation power is directed towards the population as a whole and connects to processes that Foucault terms *biopolitics* and defines in the following way:

> The attempt, starting from the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birth-rate, life expectancy, race.[11]

Thus, the life of the population forms the object for regulation through the explicit policies and regulating norms. For this, biopower depends on and conditions the development and emergence of different life sciences – home economics exemplifying one of these. Accordingly, biopolitics concerns the emergence and introduction of measures that *regulate* the lives of citizens and, through measures such as education, discipline the citizens and make them behave in ways that, seen from the state's perspective, are the most rational. In this way, biopolitics in many ways stands as equivalent to the ideas of the Nordic welfare state and its use of biopower and gender as basic organising principles of society.[12]

For our analysis, we use the concept of biopower and the forms of regulating discourse and discipline it depends on, which we analyse in the two steps outlined above. That is, we first focus on the aspect of regulation by identifying the underlying interests of the actors that engaged in the development of home economics as a field of knowledge. Here, we also consider the discourses of home economics that were promoted by different interest groups. For this, we draw on sources such as reports on education in home economics, various legal material, and journal letters and articles written by politicians of the time and actors within the field. The legal material represents central public publications regarding educational law and politics in the area in Denmark. The women represent key actors in developing and shaping home economics education in Denmark, and the journals were important and influential channels of the time for doing this.

Next, we focus on the aspect of discipline by connecting the dissemination of knowledge through home economics education when addressing the question concerning women's status in society. For this, we draw on sources including statistics on the number of schools and courses for women in the area, publications such as books and articles about education in the field of home economics, and memoires written by key actors in the development of this field in the chosen period.

Societal factors and actors prompting the schools of home economics

In early modern Europe, women's occupation had very much been linked to the home and to a role of being the person primarily responsible for domestic matters.[13] This role entailed preparing and serving food for family members and carrying out other types of tasks in connection with looking after the home. However, knowledge within this field was largely equivalent to training; that is, characterised by a very low

11 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 317.

12 Hernes (1987), 10.

13 E.g., Rogers (2006).

degree of institutionalisation and academisation. There was of course literature on topics in the field, but there was little of what could be described or was recognised as more scientific knowledge or ways to disseminate it. Thus, home economics as an academic field did not exist at that time, even though a more scientific approach to health, including knowledge of healthy food and nutrition, was under development. In Denmark, this was represented by, among others, doctor and nutritionist Mikkel Hindhede (1862–1945). Hindhede was very interested in questions concerning public health and in 1910 became head of the new Danish National Laboratory for Nutrition Research (*Statens Laboratorium for Ernæringsundersøgelser*).[14]

Until the 20th century, the dominant professions in Denmark were related to farming, with almost 80 per cent of the population living in rural areas and only approximately 20 per cent in the cities.[15] For most people, working life and life in general were therefore closely linked to farming. Some tasks were common for the family members at the farms, but there was also a high degree of division of labour. Women were predominantly responsible for the family's food and nutrition, clothing, domestic hygiene, and caring for children.[16] A similar gender-related division of labour was seen in middle-class families, especially in rural areas.

Women's occupation in housekeeping and the area of home economics was (and still is in some families today) considered a part of women's lives that was given by nature. Therefore, women were also trained from an early age in this type of work. "Schooling" for this was a part of socialisation (of girls), of which family life formed the framework, and training took place in connection with performing work tasks such as "maid" and the like. Until the beginning of the 20th century, there were only very few educations for or accessible to women in Denmark, and very few women obtained an academic education.[17]

Following societal developments, this changed during the 19th century. These developments included the transition from an agricultural to an industrial society, welfare state reforms, a transformed class structure with a larger middle class, the introduction of democracy, population growth, and the development of knowledge in the fields of health and nutrition.[18] Taken together, these developments also had a major impact on women's occupation in this field. The changes in the labour market, along with demographic changes that included a growth in urban areas and a larger middle class, meant that women's employment conditions changed, and a greater need and demand for education within women's occupational areas developed. Women organised themselves in the struggle for better conditions and rights in society and

14 In their publication "The History of Home Economics Education," Magdalene Lauridsen and Sofie Christensen describe how the actors in the field of home economics soon established what they describe as an "alliance" with Hindhede. (Sofie Christensen and Magdalene Lauridsen, *Husholdningsundervisningens Historie: Udarbejdet i Anledning af Landbrugsudstillingen* (Sorø: Sveegaards Boghandel, 1938), 5.

15 Danmarks Statistik, *Befolkningen i 150 år* (Copenhagen, Danmarks Statistiks Trykkeri, 2000), 15.

16 Hernes (1987).

17 Pia Fris Laneth, *Lillys Danmarkshistorie. Kvindeliv i fire generationer* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2006).

18 Viggo Jonasen, "Den kommunale danske velfærdsstat – gennem fire socialreformer og fire mellemtider," in *Den danske velfærdsstats historie*, ed. Niels Ploug, Ingrid Henriksen and Niels Kærgaard (Copenhagen: Socialforskningsinstituttet. 2004), 202–23.

in the labour market, which underlined the need for more schooling and education.[19]

Such conditions interacted and in themselves influenced education in the field of home economics and thereby also the development and dissemination of knowledge in the field. The different actors that shared an interest in establishing schools of home economics, including the associations of farmers, smallholders, women, and workers,[20] built their arguments for this on different discourses.

The farmers' discourse of housewife skills

The transition from agricultural to industrial societies that characterised many Western countries in the 1800s brought about great changes for all those engaged in agriculture. The period was characterised by a significant decrease in the number of farms and thus also in the number of people employed in the sector, be it as a farmer, agricultural assistant, maid, or as a housewife on a farm. Thus, these people had to find alternative employment opportunities, which could be positively supported by, and necessitated, education and training.

Even though a form of primary school had already been introduced by law in Denmark – which ensured that children in both the countryside and urban areas received some school education – the education system was still characterised by substantial inequalities and differences. Young people in rural areas had to move to the larger cities if they wanted an education after primary school, and for women the possibilities of education was quite small.[21]

The farmers' associations constituted strong players in Danish politics during the period. In home economics education, they saw an opportunity to ensure better educational opportunities in the rural areas, not least for their daughters, wives, and mothers. This could both be of benefit to the farms and ensure a possible livelihood for the women in rural areas who might not be able to get employment on the farms but could instead work as maids, cooks, or housekeepers for middle-class families, whose numbers increased in the growing urban areas.

The Danish farmers' associations therefore took several initiatives in this direction. Under their auspices, the education of women at farms was discussed as early as the middle of the 19th century. For example, it was discussed in a report by Frederiksborg County Farmers' Association in 1857: "What can be done to train Peasant Girls to be skilled Housewives? By what means can it work for the Promotion of Garden Culture?"[22] For this purpose, the farmers' association advocated for the education of girls to be "skilled housewives".

However, it was not until the beginning of the 20th century that such initiatives really began to take root. At the delegates' meeting of the Zealand Farmers' Association in 1901, important members expressed support for the cause. For example, Chamberlain Oxholm stated that:

19 Gerda Petri and Minna Kragelund, *Mor Magda – og alle de andre. Husholdning som fag fra 1900 til i dag* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Komma, 1980), 147–76; Hernes (1987).

20 Inga Dahlsgaard, *Women in Denmark: Yesterday and Today (*Copenhagen: Det Danske Selskab, 1980).

21 Petri and Kragelund (1980).

22 Anders Uhrskov, *Frederiksborg Amts Landboforening 1843–1943* (Hillerød: Frederiksborg Amts Landboforening, 1943), 29.

> The courses [in home economics] can give housewives the opportunity to prepare good and healthy food for little money and it can raise the culture in the homes and lead to greater 'hygge'.[23]

Again, the educational objective appears to be training the *housewife* in cooking that is both healthy and economic and in cultivating the home. In this way, courses in home economics appear to be an assurance of the future as a housewife.

The smallholders' discourse of economising

The smallholders' associations also constituted strong players in Danish politics during the period. They represented the small farms, typically run as family farms in which all family members took active parts. Accordingly, the associations took strong interest in home economics.[24] The positive significance of the courses for smallholders was noted at the above-mentioned meeting.[25] In her speech, one of the Danish pioneers of home economics, Magdalene Lauridsen, argued that such an education could contribute to "creating opportunities for savings and better nutrition of the rural population if the housewife knew these conditions."[26]

Referring to her experiences from study visits in England, she further described that:

> Here they had arranged courses for especially the poorer part of the population, where they were taught about better utilization of vegetables and cheap products that could improve public nutrition.[27]

Thus, the aspects of economy, utility, and nutrition appear as central arguments not only from the perspectives of the farmers and smallholders, but also from pioneering women within the field.

In 1908, the first Danish home economics association was founded on the initiative of Rebekka la Cour (1878–1961). She was a trained teacher in home economics but had also studied at the Royal Danish Veterinary and Agricultural High School and, together with her husband, had founded an agricultural school.[28]

The associations of home economics addressed the interests of the housewives at the farms and in the countryside. After a few years however, other associations arose around home economics that also addressed the interests of other groups of women. The Danish Housewives' Association was thus started in 1917 and primarily targeted the interests of the housewives in urban areas. In addition, the Collaborating Danish Association of Home Economics in the Countryside – which had information as one of its purposes – was established in 1921. This association published the magazine, *Husholdningsbladet* ("Journal of Home Economics") and was also the initiator of another magazine, *Vort Landbrug. Tidsskrift for Husholdning* ("Our Farming: Journal of Home Economics"), which was published from 1922 under the auspices of the farmers' associations.[29]

23 Gustav Nedergaard, *Magdalene fra Ankerhus* (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gad, 1997), 95.

24 Petri and Kragelund (1980).

25 Nedergaard (1997), 94.

26 Nedergaard (1997), 93.

27 Nedergaard (1997), 93.

28 Petri and Kragelund (1980), 67.

29 Petri and Kragelund (1980), 69.

These journals both contributed to the same discourse. For instance, in the *Journal of Home Economics*, the chairman of the Cooperative Farmers' Associations, H. Valentiner, praised the educational activities for country women in such ways:

> It is of great importance that the question of a better use and utilization of the foodstuffs available to the population is put under debate now. The fact that food is cooked poorly, unappetizing, does not just mean a loss of nutritional value - the effects go far beyond. … and the form in which they work entails that women in many different life positions (farmer and peasant wives, young girls, teacher, and clergy) get the opportunity to get together, not only to hear lectures on topics of particular interest to them, but also to have the opportunity afterwards to exchange their opinions, their thoughts on what they have seen and heard.[30]

Another important contributor to the *Journal of Home Economics* was the pioneer Rebekka La Cour, who promoted similar ideas.[31] For some years, she was also the editor of *Our Farming: Journal of Home Economics*.[32]

The home economics and housewives' associations enjoyed great popularity. In the mid-1930s, the home economics associations had more than 10,000 members, predominantly in rural areas, and the number increased steadily.[33] The Danish Housewives' Associations, established in 1930, reached approximately 5,000 members during the first 10 years.[34]

The women's discourse of qualification and liberation

The pioneering women within the field of home economics also had strong affiliations with feminist organisations. For the feminist movement, the education of women was a key issue. Although the level of education began to rise in general, many women still obtained only a primary school education. In addition, there were only limited possibilities for education within the employment areas dominated by women, which contributed to great gender inequality within education. Accordingly, the education of women was considered an important way of strengthening women's position in society and establishing more equal conditions between the sexes. The education of women in the field of home economics was no exception to being seen as a positive step in the right direction of liberating women from the economic dependence of men.

As stated on the frontpage of the journal issued by the Danish Women's National Council, the purpose of education was "to ensure the development and qualification of women to the responsibility and work of full citizens."[35] In this way, the initiatives in the field of home economics can be seen as linked to the women's movement and women's struggle for equal rights.[36] Addressing the rights of maids, one of the pioneering women pointed out:

30 Heinrich N. Valentiner, "Husholdningsaftenskoler," Husholdningsbladet (1902), 62–64.

31 Petri and Kragelund (1980), 67.

32 Nedergaard (1997), 85.

33 Lars Christian Biza, Benedikte Krebs Lange, and Eva Katarina Lous. *Ude eller hjemme* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitet, Historisk Institut, 1982); the Danish population were in 1930 app. 3.5 million (Danmarks Statistik, 2000)

34 Petri and Kragelund (1980), 67.

35 *Kvinden og samfundet* 34, no. 14, (1918).

36 Liversage, *Kvinden og historien. Kønsroller og familiemønstre i* økonomisk *betydning* (1972).

> We need cooking schools and worker kitchens that could undertake further education, especially in cooking, and we especially need the few homes that have both the will and the ability to guide the young girls, in a sensible way, to engage in the work that they perform as maids.[37]

The mantra of the women's movement with the schools of home economics was that women should have the same opportunities for education as men. The schools of home economics were the obvious opportunity for establishing a vocational education for women, which should equate domestic knowledge with other subjects, and by qualifying women make them able to enjoy the same respect and reputation as men. As also highlighted by the pioneer, Birgitte Berg-Nielsen (1861–1951), who played an important part in promoting the Danish Women's Society's policy in home economics and establishing a school of home economics as well as a teacher training college in Frederiksberg in 1905, the purpose of home economics education was not to force women back home but to give them the opportunity for a profession, financial independence, and – through rational planning – the strength to engage in important societal issues.[38]

The workers' discourse of welfare

Many women were employed as unskilled labour in various professional areas related to home economics (e.g., maid, housekeeper, kitchen assistant, cook), and they were not in a strong position in the struggle for the protection of their interests. The unions that had been set up in the late 1800s, primarily prompted by women employed in industry and urban areas, were aware of this. Also, for the trade unions, the recognition of home economics as a field of knowledge therefore became a key issue, since education would put women in a much better position in terms of negotiating their pay, employment, and working conditions in general.

Thus, several educational initiatives within home economics were initiated by the trade unions, which e.g., established the Maids' Vocational School (Husassistenternes Fagskole) in 1906. From 1921, the Danish Red Cross also gave women a short-term education in the area. The state was also directly involved as a player in such activities, since a few decades later it established the "Home Economics course for unemployed women" under the auspices of the Directorate of Labour for the Unemployment Funds. In the years 1935–1940, approximately 500 women participated in these courses.

The affiliation with the labour and trade union movement was obvious. For example, as described in the publication *The Maids' Vocational School - 25 Years of Activity 1906–1931*:

> The Maids' Vocational School was established by the Maids' Union or, as it was then called, "The Copenhagen Association for Maids" …. The school is today a self-governing Institution with a Board appointed by the Ministry of Business Affairs …. The Maids' Vocational School is the first Vocational School in Denmark to be built

37 Birgitte Berg-Nielsen, "Tjenestepigernes stilling," *Hvad vi vil, 1, no. 10 (*1888), 77–78.

38 Elisbeth Andersen, *Fejekost og stemmeret* (Copenhagen: Hernovs Forlag, 1988), 63; Inga Dahlsgaard, *Women in Denmark: Yesterday and Today (*Copenhagen: Det Danske Selskab, 1980).

> by the working class itself and by the part of it that, although relatively small, had the strength and ability to work together not only for the entire class's economy but also its moral and cultural elevation.[39]

Class solidarity was central in the attempt to provide competences for the maids and others belonging to the working classes. When more women entered the labour market this brought significant changes in the family structure. Increasingly, industrialisation led to a separation of production and domestic matters. Along with this came an increased need for and strengthened political interest in the state having to perform tasks in the social and welfare area. Therefore, a more comprehensive policy in this regard became necessary, one that called for welfare reforms and was reflected in the period, specifically in the adoption of several laws in the area.[40] In addition, the state's new ways of getting involved in home economics were also reflected in, for instance, the establishment of the Danish Health Authority in 1909.[41]

Citizens' welfare – in the form of ensuring health care and not least education within the field – thus to a greater extent became a matter for the state. This mattered for the notions tied to the housewife and her role in society. In some ways, the discourse of the welfare state took over the discourse of the housewife; in other ways, it played a parallel role to this.

From a welfare state perspective, the housewife was seen as a key player in taking care of the family's health, providing a good upbringing for children, etc., and as a free source of labour that could keep (welfare) state expenditure as low as possible. In that process, home economics as a field of knowledge gained a different (and higher) status and significance. This was underlined by the state support[42] and illustrative of its biopolitics. Thus, the distribution of this knowledge and the disciplining of women into caring (from the perspective of the state) was important. This was therefore accompanied by activities set in motion or supported by the public sector to aid the development of knowledge in the field, as well as its distribution.

Schools of home economics and their disciplining functions

The first formal initiatives to establish education for women in home economics in Denmark were taken in the latter part of the 19th century. Already in the 1870s, Natalie Zahle (1827–1913), a pioneer in the field of education and manager of a girls' school and a high school for girls, had written about involving "domestic work such as washing, ironing, and cooking."[43] as an integral part of the teaching in the school, and states:

39 Frederik Dalsgaard, *Husassistenternes Fagskole- 25 Aars Virksomhed: 1906–1931* (Copenhagen: Dansk Andels Trykkeri. Husassistenternes Fagskole, 1931), 7–9.

40 Including a new poverty law and the law on old-age benefits (1891), social reform (1891–1892), voluntary health insurance with state subsidy (1892), law on plots of land for farm workers (1899), legislation for smallholders (1919), new social reform (1933), etc.

41 Danish: Sundhedsstyrelsen (1909).

42 According to Larsen (2008), state funding for schools of home economics was introduced 1907 and thus the schools obtained a semi-public status. Christian Larsen, *Fra skoleanordninger til Den Store Skolekommission* (Copenhagen: Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitetsskole, 2008), 32.

43 Natalie Zahle, *Om den kvindelige uddannelse her i Landet* (Copenhagen: Th. Linds Forlag, 1873), quote from Jette Benn, "Skolekøkkenet – et rum for husgerninger – for disciplinering og udfoldelse." in *Skolefag i 100 år*, ed. Vagn Oluf Jensen (Copenhagen: Danmarks Pædagogiske Bibliotek, 1995),

> There is enough talk that the young women of our time do not understand how to run a house; what if they are taught such Knowledge not only theoretically, but practically, at the age when the Body needs much Movement?[44]

As quoted, the central purpose of the school was to discipline the female body. Even if initiatives had been seen in the direction of establishing a home economics education earlier in the 19th century, it was towards the very last part of the century that something really happened, and the regulation of the field began.

In 1898, the first Danish school of home economics was established in the Danish town of Sorø, with Magdalene Lauridsen (1873–1957) as a leading person. A few years later, a teacher training college in home economics was also established there. The Sorø School of Home Economics likewise educated young women to become so-called "itinerant teachers", which meant teachers who moved from place to place and to distant areas (sometimes by cycling from one place to the other), and teaching home economics to young women and farmers' wives.[45]

The education in home economics soon became very popular among women, and in the following years several schools were established all over the country, though mostly in the countryside or in the provincial towns. In 1935–1936, there were 22 such schools.[46] The number of pupils at the schools increased steadily in the first decades of the 1900s, as can be seen in the statistics from Statistics Denmark, which show that there were 79 pupils in the school year 1908–09, 333 in the school year 1920–21, and 1,543 in the school year 1935–36.[47]

In addition, in the period 1902-1905, three teacher training colleges in the field of home economics were founded, one in Sorø and two in the Copenhagen area, to educate teachers for the schools of home economics.[48] The number of students at these colleges was 117 in 1934–35 and 127 in 1935–36.[49]

During this period, the education at schools and colleges of home economics could be of a duration of up to approximately two years of full-time study. However, some courses or series of courses could be stand-alone teaching sessions or lectures, or a series of consecutive sessions of, for instance, two hours each (courses).[50] The content of the activities is described in the schools' curricula, syllabi, and in various reports,

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91–104.

44 Zahle, in *"Om den kvindelige uddannelse her i Landet,"* (1873), quote from Benn (Copenhagen: Danmarks Pædagogiske Bibliotek, 1995), 92.

45 Petri and Kragelund (1980), 102; Folmer Dam et al., *Magdalene Lauridsens liv og virke, Udgivet på hendes 100-års dag, den 25. april 1973 af Elevforeningen Ankerhus* (Sorø: Elevforeningen Ankerhus, 1973).

46 Petri and Kragelund (1980), 102.

47 Danmarks Statistik, *Statistisk* Årbog (Copenhagen: Statens Statistiske Bureau. Thieles Trykkeri (1910), 151; (1922), 145; (1937), 154. For comparison, teacher training colleges, another important educational area, had 1,757 students in the years 1935–1936, which illustrates the great popularity of the schools of home economics.

48 Sofie Christensen and Magdalene Lauridsen, *Husholdningsundervisningens Historie: Udarbejdet i Anledning af Landbrugsudstillingen* (Sorø: Sveegaards Boghandel, 1938).

49 Danmarks Statistik, *Statistisk Årbog* (Copenhagen: Statens Statistiske Bureau. Thieles Trykkeri, 1937). 154.

50 Gustav Nedergaard, "Ankerhus gennem 100 år," in *Festskrift: Ankerhus Seminarium 100* år (Sorø: Ankerhus Seminarium, 2002), 31 - 51 40; Petri and Kragelund (1980), 24.

of which we provide some examples. The school examples are selected because they are situated in different catchment areas – a rural and an urban – and accordingly had different target groups. They serve to illustrate the types of disciplining related to the different contexts of the schools.

The Sorø School of Home Economics

The Sorø School of Home Economics represented the rural community, and teaching activities were aimed at women from such areas. In the Danish magazine *Kvinden og Samfundet (Woman and Society)*, which represented the Danish Women's Society, the school described its activities in an annual report as follows:

> Both theoretical and practical instruction is given. The theoretical includes Home Economics Chemistry, Health Science, Natural Science, Botany and Bookkeeping. The practical exercises include ordinary and fine cooking, butchering, baking, French washing and ironing, maid work, dress and linen sewing, stuffing, and patching. The students are divided into teams, which change every month, and all students receive an equal share in all work. In addition, emphasis is placed on opening the minds of young girls to the questions of the time through lectures of a versatile nature - on literature, the legal position of women, economics, etc.[51]

As illustrated, housekeeping implied many theoretical knowledge dimensions. In addition, the field of knowledge also implied practical dimensions of disciplining, which are reflected in the photographs of students and teachers wearing uniform clothing. The "uniform" was typical at the schools of home economics and contributed to the discipline of conformity and *esprit de corps*.[52]

Figure 1. *Maids' Vocational School in Copenhagen.* Photo collection: Royal Danish Library.

The Suhr School of Home Economics

The Suhr School of Home Economics represented education for women in the urban areas and the women of the bourgeoisie. A description from the school defines the academic content, which in some respects is like the descriptions from the Sorø School of Home Economics. However, differences can also be observed, which are significant to note, and which express and reflect that the two schools to a certain extent addressed different target groups, as seen in an advert in the journal of the Danish Women's Society in 1901:

51 "Sorø Husholdningsskole," *Kvinden og Samfundet* 15, no. 18 (1899), 202.

52 E.g., Magdalene Lauridsen, *"Fem og Tyve Aar 1895–1920. Et tilbageblik,"* (Sorø: Foreningen Ankerhus, 1921), 7, and at the photo which is from the Maids´ Vocational School, Copenhagen, 1932.

> It is our pleasure to draw attention to Ms. Ingeborg Suhr, who has set up a housewife school here in the city, (see the ad below!) which strives to become a model school for practical housework. The aim of the school is to seek to remove all the disadvantages with which it has hitherto been associated for parents to let their daughters learn housework and housekeeping …. All emphasis is placed on the teaching of cooking, setting the table, serving, baking, washing, household accounting, nursing, etc., in short, everything that falls into a bourgeois home.[53]

In another description of the Suhr School of Home Economics, from 1915, it appears how the school addresses the daughters of the bourgeoisie:

> It is of course of great importance to parents in the province that their daughters can stay at the school and use the afternoon and evening also to seek other education. If desired, students outside the education, which is both of a practical and theoretical nature and includes nursing and childcare, can also participate in washing, rolling, and ironing. (…) The home economics education offered by the school can also be supplemented with a course in dressmaking.[54]

As also pointed out elsewhere, to be schooled to oversee domestic servants they had to learn the principles of housework.[55] Subjects such as natural science and plant science, however, are not mentioned as part of the teaching, as was the case at the Sorø School of Home Economics.

Figure 2. *Suhr School of Home Economics.* Photo collection: Royal Danish Library.

It is remarkable here that explicit emphasis was placed on practical elements of housework rather than on "opening the minds of the young girls," which was mentioned at the Sorø school. This may partly reflect the folk high school inspiration that was more typical for the rural schools. Partly, that the girls from the bourgeoisie were less familiar with doing practical housework at home but had to learn it "theoretically" at school, while dressmaking was considered "useful" for them. Likewise, finer cooking appeared to be more important at Suhr's, whereas themes of rural households such as gardening and livestock farming were more important at Sorø.

Course activities, evening classes, and the like

The courses of shorter duration reflected the breadth in relation to the work tasks associated with the role of the housewife. Regarding the courses held by itinerant

53 "Fra uge til Uge," *Kvinden og samfundet* 17, no. 11 (1901), 42.

54 "Den Suhrske Husmoderskole," *Kvinden og Samfundet* 31, no. 17 (1915), 264.

55 Gerda Petri, "Huslig uddannelse – socialisering omkring århundredskiftet," in *Pigeopdragelse*, ed. Mette Winge et al. (Roskilde: Forlaget Emmeline, 1981), 38–41.

teachers in the rural areas, one of the early teachers, Maren Tarp (1885–1978), describes their form and content as follows:

> The teaching itself was organised by Magdalene Lauridsen according to a plan which the teacher was not allowed to deviate from unless special circumstances prevailed. A demonstration usually included the preparation of two courses of food with a certain purpose such as to increase the use of garden items, especially cheap and nutritionally valuable products. During the 2 hours that the lesson lasted, the price, nutritional value and preparation of the products were discussed. In addition, a ½-hour lecture was given on a special topic, e.g., water, milk, meat, vegetables and the second winter also on hygiene, e.g., the skin and its care, the blood, and the breath.[56]

This teaching was aimed at women in the countryside, who could grow their own vegetables, and at providing knowledge about cooking, food, and nutrition, but it also dealt with health-related topics. The courses were built around the preparation of different dishes, with the simultaneous dissemination of knowledge about the nutritional value of food.

In an edition of the *Journal of Home Economics* from 1908, the then chairman of the Cooperative Farmers' Associations, H. Valentiner, describes an evening course in very positive terms:

> Nothing is more enjoyable than such a demonstration – all the while the teacher, with the help of a petroleum appliance, prepares the food in the quickest and cleanest way (Cleanliness is a quality that is repeatedly emphasised). While peeling a potato or sharing an apple, she [the teacher, ed.] tells her 30-40 listeners about the properties of water, or what can be said about milk, meat, etc. These evening schools, and the form in which they operate, mean that women in many different positions of life (farmhand and housewife wives, young girls, teachers, and clergymen) can get together.[57]

Another example illustrates courses aimed at women who could be described as belonging to the bourgeoisie. The Suhr School of Home Economics in 1938 describes the curriculum of a "Monthly course for advanced students" in home economics:

> The monthly course is intended to give housewives, housekeepers, managers of summer pensions, etc., who are skilled in daily cooking, a supplementary education in the features and specialties required of the trained housewife in larger homes. … The teaching includes Dinner-oriented and cold Table intended for finer Household, further serving, Table setting, Table decoration and Waiting. In addition to the summer course in June, pickling and boiling. The teacher presents and reviews the dishes that the students prepare and eat themselves the following days of the week.[58]

Here, there was no explicit focus on the nutritional or health dimension of cooking but on cooking and keeping a home, such as this related to the higher social classes.

56 Quote from Dam et al. (1973), 28.

57 Valentiner, "Husholdningsaftenskoler, " *Husholdningsbladet* (1902), 62–64 (author's translation of the quote from the Danish in the text).

58 Agnes Elgstrøm, *Undervisningsplan.* (Copenhagen: Den Suhrske Husmoderskole og Husholdningsseminarium. 1939), 20.

The farmers' associations were great supporters of the itinerant courses. The spread of the courses can be seen in statistics, which show that between 1901 and 1907 41,421 women across the country participated in such courses under their auspices.[59] They also set up so-called "home economics evening schools", which many attended. In an article on the subject, the number of schools in 1904–1905 is noted as 190 and the number of pupils as 7,827.[60]

Similar courses were held under the auspices of the Danish Women's Society, and there was an active information effort carried out by the home economics associations that used magazines such as the *Journal of Home Economics* for dissemination.

In summary, the teaching activities and the knowledge disseminated reflected what was considered *useful for housewives*, whether in the countryside or in urban areas. The disciplining functions concern the development of, first and foremost, skills in relation to ensuring the nutrition and health of the family and, in relation to this, economic behaviour in consideration of the family's resources. The latter obviously necessitated that the schools of home economics reflected the social classes and situations of their main target groups, which they did.

Home economics and its conflictual status as disciplining knowledge

As described, there were in many ways overlapping interests among the contemporary movements in developing home economics as a field of knowledge. In their considerations of the contribution of this knowledge to the public or the private sphere and to the social status of women, there were also considerable differences and discrepancies. Sometimes there was even a discrepancy within the social movement's own logic as to whether this knowledge promoted an idea of emancipation or the opposite.

Liberation and agency of women

Education and training in home economics initially constituted a large part of the educational activities for women in the countryside and in the smaller towns.[61] However, it was not primarily with the aim of gaining professional competence that women were educated in home economics. Many of them, perhaps most, took or came to the schools of home economics to improve their home and family skills. But the development of home economics as a field of knowledge and its interplay with the business side of life must not be underestimated. Education in home economics required people with a higher education to engage in and implement the activities.

Thus, the emergence of the new field of knowledge contributed to the further education of more people, most often women, who could take on new business areas. In that way, home economics could provide women with more agency. That is, they might be allowed to enter the public sphere if it were congruent with domestic duties and could be considered an extension of their activities as homemakers.[62]

59 Petri and Kragelund (1980), 71.

60 *Illustreret tidende (No Authorname.)*, "Landboforeningernes Husholdningsaftenskoler," *Illustreret Tidende* 48, no. 2 (1906), 25.

61 Karen E. Andreasen and Annette Rasmussen, "Husholdningssagens betydning for den lille bys modernitet: kvinders uddannelse og erhverv inden for husholdning 1890–1940," *Erhvervshistorisk Årbog*, no. 1–2 (2020), 67–91.

62 Lützen (2000),147–76.

As mentioned above, within the women's movement Birgitte Berg-Nielsen was particularly important for home economics education. She and others went against the idea of considering such knowledge as something "innate" in girls and favoured the notion that "you have to learn something to be something."[63] She saw it as an important purpose of the education in home economics to support the woman as an individual through professional expertise and to try to create respect for domestic work. In addition, she emphasised that the subject had to be part of compulsory public education, also aimed at men, and should be considered a matter for the state, which consequently should support the home economics schools. However, this did not happen.[64]

Even in rural areas, the feminist organisations' ideas of education in home economics were received positively. The number of smallholders with their own land grew during the 1800s, and they also had an increased interest in strengthening and improving the farms to get the best possible return. The farm owners' new conditions as self-employed supported a strengthened interest in the optimisation of their farms and knowledge about this.[65]

As the women took care of important work tasks in the operation of the farm, such as those in charge of the household – in the form of the production of healthy nutrition for the family in all its phases, the maintenance of health and the prevention of diseases – a general interest in strengthening the knowledge and skills of women in rural areas developed. It was therefore also the politically strong farmers' associations in the Danish agricultural community that supported early initiatives for courses and education for women in home economics.[66] While there was a perceived notion of women's natural abilities for housework and childcare, there was at the same time widespread ignorance in the field, which the state wished to rectify.

For many years, advocates of women's rights had supported the strengthening of women's educational opportunities. Thus, for many decades this led to a "strong alliance" between the women's movement and the state to develop an education for women in home economics and motherhood.[67] The women's movement stated economics as an argument for the state to go into the establishment of schools of home economics, arguing that great societal values could be created if the housewives received solid education on a scientific basis.[68]

Tying women to a subordinate social status

State aid for home economics education was not obtained in the first years. Thus, it was a paid education until 1930, primarily aimed at the daughters of peasants and the bourgeoisie. This meant that the largest group of employees within home economics, that is the maids and servants, was not initially covered by the vocational training relevant to them.

63 Petri, "*Huslig uddannelse – socialisering omkring* århundredskiftet," (1981), 38.

64 Dahlsgaard (1980).

65 Petri and Kragelund (1980), 13, 71–76.

66 Nedergaard (1997), 90; Petri and Kragelund (1980), 43, 71–76.

67 Laneth (2006), 243.

68 Andersen (1988), 60.

It was not until the establishment of the Maids' Vocational School in 1906 that the educational needs of this group of women were met.[69] However, the servants remained in many cases uneducated and had low-paid jobs, and it was only with the adoption of a law in 1930 providing subsidies for evening and youth schools that they were given the opportunity of a formalised education in the field.

In the bourgeois culture of the urban middle classes, indoor life and a minimum of manual work characterised the ideal of a woman.[70] According to this ideal, women were supposed to perform embroidery and play piano. There was a sharp division between the domestic sphere of the home and the public sphere of business and politics, of which the first belonged to women and the latter to men. There were strict rules as to the roles of the sexes and as to considering a woman's place to be in the home and taking care of it. When young women entered a school of home economics, it was with the special focus of learning to become homemakers and adapting to the set of attitudes confined to this role. To gain and exert her role in the home, not necessarily as an active homemaker but as a person in charge of domestic servants, the bourgeois woman had to acquire knowledge of home economics and was disciplined into the attitudes that came with this.[71]

In this way, schools of home economics also contributed to tying women to the home, to a "calling of being a wife and mother."[72] Even women for whom marriage was not possible could follow this calling into charitable work or by acting as a mother for the children of others or persons her own age or older and thus display domesticity. This meant that women could be allowed to enter the public sphere if it were an extension of their activities as homemakers. Accordingly, it was also as homemakers that women argued for the right to become involved in social affairs. Leading women within a moral reform movement that worked against the legalisation of prostitution compared this to filth piling up in the homes and advocated for "a homemaker's sense of cleanliness."[73] Thus, part of the reform work of these middle-class women can be seen as an attempt to domesticate the public sphere – the home was society, and society should be transformed into a home.

The domesticating of the public sphere was very much in line with the Nordic welfare state idea that the state is the "home of the people". Thus, it assisted the development of the welfare state, in which the biopolitics played an important role in supporting the physical and social health of the population and thus keeping down the costs of health as well as social care. As part of this, the development of home economics as a field of knowledge helped to professionalise women so that they could leave their own homes to enter the labour force. The core of this professionalisation of mothering and care, however, was not considered an employment of similar status as other public domains of knowledge, which were dominated by men. Although education was considered critical in elevating the status of women, the fields of

69 Anette Wolthers, *Fagbevægelse, ligestilling og mangfoldighed i mere end 100 år* (Copenhagen: FIU-Ligestilling, 2015), 59.

70 Ruth Emerek et al., *Kvinder i byen. Aalborg omkring år 1900* (Copenhagen: Strandbergs Forlag, 1982).

71 Petri (1981), 38–41.

72 Lützen (2000), 147–76.

73 Lützen (2000), 147.

knowledge that they went into did not provide them with the sufficient skills and confidence that allowed them to move beyond the "domestic" spaces into the public world.[74]

Conclusion

The development of home economics as a field of knowledge has been influenced by several different societal conditions and different actors. It was highly influenced by associations that represented the interests of the countryside, including the Danish farmers' and smallholders' associations on the one hand, and the women's associations and trade unions – the latter representing urban workers – on the other hand.

They represented very strong interests that to some extent coincided with welfare political agendas, whose cause could also be promoted through, and in fact depended on, the development and dissemination of knowledge within the area of home economics – biopower.[75] Such dissemination took place through the teaching and activities of the schools of home economics, which the state supported ideologically and later also financially. Thus, the strength of the interests behind the schools of home economics and the fact that they allied with the state favoured the development of home economics as a field of knowledge.

The pioneering women – such as Birgitte Berg-Nielsen, Rebekka La Cour, and Magdalene Lauridsen, who were leaders of schools of home economics – advocated strongly for an academic education within the field.[76] However, it was only after the middle of the twentieth century that efforts had some success, with the establishment in 1963 of the Nordic High School for Home Economics Science, while requests for an academic education under the auspices of, for instance, the university were not successful until much later.[77]

The pioneering women spoke partly on behalf of the farmers' organisations and interests and partly on behalf of feminist organisations and women interested in qualification and liberation. Through their positions, they represented and could serve as "ideal types" for other women, who via their qualifications took up instructional and leading positions in society. Thus, they demonstrated how knowledge could add status and power to women.

The forms of knowledge that were expressed in courses and education – and the disciplining function of home economics – could be claimed to be of both a gendered cultural and professional character. The gendered culture emphasised the role of women as housewives and their functions of housekeeping, including decoration, table setting, and serving (men), which would discipline them into beings in inferior social positions and ultimately served the purpose of the state.[78]

The professional orientation on the other hand appeared from the curricular content based on knowledge linked to subjects such as nutrition, chemistry, hygiene,

74 Rogers (2006), 93–133.

75 Foucault (1978).

76 Petri and Kragelund (1980), 58.

77 Petri and Kragelund (1980), 94.

78 Foucault (2008).

and horticulture, which later developed into scientific and educational areas that today are highly frequented by women. In this way, the development of home economics as a field of knowledge has also been important in educating, professionalising, and thereby increasing the social status of women. However, it is still questionable to what extent increased professionalisation within the field of home economics has added to the status and power of women.

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