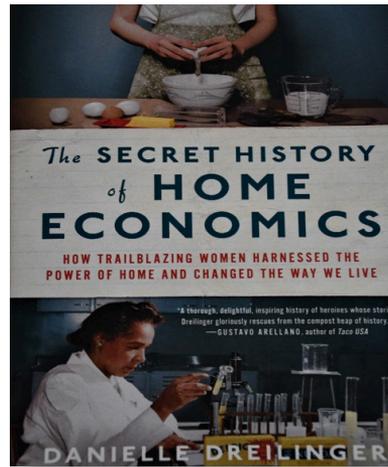


doi: 10.26529/cepsj.1350

Danielle Dreilinger, *The Secret History of Home Economics. How Trailblazing Women Harnessed the Power of Home and Changed the Way We Live*, W. W. Norton & Company: 2021; 348 pp.: ISBN 978-1-324-00449-3

Reviewed by FRANCKA LOVŠIN KOZINA¹

The book *The Secret History of Home Economics. How Trailblazing Women Harnessed the Power of Home and Changed the Way We Live* examines the historical role of home economics scientists in America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is the result of Danielle Dreilinger's (former New Orleans Times-Picayune education reporter) in-depth research work on home economics history and comprises 348 pages, divided into 15 chapters, a conclusion, notes and a subject index.



The book provides an overview of the areas in which home economics has played an important role, as well as the life stories of individuals who have dedicated their lives to this area. The essence of the book is clearly outlined in the preface, entitled Everything You Know about Home Economics is Wrong.

In the book, Dreilinger deals with the problem of girls' education in the nineteenth century, a time when care for women's education was not a priority. Catherine Beecher was an American educator who advocated the education of women. Her motto was: "Educate a woman, and the interests of a whole family are secured" (Dreilinger, 2021, p. 4). In 1841, Beecher published the book *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* and gave housework a scientific name: "domestic economy". She went on to argue that this subject should be taught not by amateurs but by professional educators.

The second chapter is intended to present the development of the core idea of home economics education. The author presents a conference in Lake

¹ Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia; francka.lovsin@pef.uni-lj.si.

Placid that took place at the end of the nineteenth century, at which ten participants met and established the goal of convincing universities that “domestic science” should become part of university studies. For this purpose, they also created a new name, “home economics”, and outlined the content framework of the field, which received a new (sociological) emphasis: education in which one of the aims is eliminating poverty. The author goes on to present how a series of further conferences at Lake Placid highlighted several topics related to prudent consumerism, juvenile justice, wages, division of labour and women’s employment. By the end of the nineteenth century, there was a clearly formulated idea that “domestic science” is not only cooking and sewing, but a scientific field that overlaps with areas of sociology.

In the present book, several fields of interest to home economics are covered. The author presents the role of home economics during the First World War. At this time, public school home economics classes adapted their work and helped make garments for the Red Cross, travelling food-conservation classrooms were established, dietitians took care of soldiers’ nutrition, and so on. The role played by experts in the field of households was recognised as positive, which was also reflected in the establishment of the subject of households in the school system.

In the next chapter, we discover that in 1923, the Bureau of Home Economics was founded, which was taken over by Louise Stanley, who had a PhD in physiological chemistry, and became the largest employer of women scientists (experts in nutrition, textiles and economics). These scientists studied the content of nutrients in foods, food preparation techniques, fibre properties and women’s use of time, as well as developing standards for clothing measurement and nutrition requirements. Their findings were promoted in women’s magazines. During this period, home economists were employed in the food industry, while the emergence of new electrical household appliances meant a new field of employment and the economic boom enabled employment in marketing, recipe development, product testing, writing advice, and so on. Their voices were also heard on the radio. At the academic level, they also focused on birth control and childcare.

The next chapter presents the role of Eleanor Roosevelt in the area of home economics. Roosevelt wrote the book *It’s Up to the Women*, which raised awareness of the importance of smart spending, household budgeting, diet planning, and so on. She also helped promote school nutrition. Representatives of African and domestic Latino economists also played an important role during the Depression. Kittrel was the first black woman with a doctorate in nutrition to follow the philosophy that society can be changed through the family

(e.g., the idea that tackling hunger can help calm politically unstable countries). Latino home economist De Baca Gilbert had a significant impact on the life of Latinos. She wrote a modern professional cookbook with Mexican America recipes, and in addition to the desire to reduce poverty and hunger, she also advocated the preservation of Latino culture. Although a significant proportion of education was related to nutrition, remarkable progress was also seen in other areas thanks to individuals such as Mamar, who recognised an opportunity to improve life by advancing technology. As an expert of the Rural Electrification Administration, Mamar was actively involved in raising people's awareness of the benefits of electrical household appliances, such as the washing machine. She quickly recognised that such machines can save women time, as well as relieving them of repetitive, tiring work and improving their quality of life.

The next chapter describes the role of household professionals during the Second World War. It demonstrates the importance of the production of useful yet attractive textiles for the maintenance of simple clothes for all working women (e.g., nurses), as well as developments in the field of nutrition, while the formation of food groups and RDAs is also outlined.

In the following chapters, we can follow the progress in the field of home economics in the sense that the concept of household increasingly shifted from the idea of educating girls for the home to the concept of science, life skills and career, while also addressing the issues of gender and racial equality. This was not, however, recognised by society. Over time, the view emerged that the household does not actually train women for independent careers, and that it is not intellectually appropriate, as it only trains women for working at home. Home economics scientists tried to avoid strongly ingrained perceptions of the household, such as the idea that cooking and cleaning matters, by changing the name. However, the result was not in line with expectations.

In the final chapter, the author gives the following suggestions on how to bring back home economics: change the name back to "home economics"; make home economics mandatory, diversify the profession, embrace life skills such as career preparation, and advance the progressive, scientific and ecological view within home economics.

The present book is interesting and reveals several roles of home economics experts throughout history as well as their impact: they tried to reduce malnutrition and poverty by helping to develop nutritional guidelines and school meals; they researched the chemical properties of fibres and standardised the rules of clothing; they sought a balance between science and the utility of products (e.g., usable and attractive textiles); they introduced innovations in the routine of everyday cooking and cleaning following the modern

technological trends; they collaborated in the development of astronauts' diets; they engaged in consumer awareness and job creation, etc. In short, the central concern of the home economics scientist was how to use the individual's gains in time to improve the quality of life. The present book is also interesting because it speaks openly about the delusions of a particular time, e.g., the slow response to the stereotypical perception of the role of women, racism, etc. It is interesting to note that the author suggests that the current neglect and stagnation of home economics should not be permanent. She gives the reader some ideas for further reflection.