

“As Members of the Social Whole”: A History of Social Reform as a Focus of Home Economics, 1895–1940

Rima D. Apple, Joyce Coleman

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Abstract

This article studies the critical purpose of home economics postsecondary education as preparation for social reform, focusing on the role that founders expected homemakers to play in ameliorating social problems. For them, the goal of home economics was a better world. The means to this improved society was scientific knowledge applied to the family and the community by home economists and home economics-trained homemakers. Yet, by the 1920s, it was clear that the social responsibility of homemakers, as envisioned by the first leaders of the discipline, had virtually disappeared from the rhetoric of home economics. Although no one factor explains the silencing of calls for civic involvement on the part of homemakers, factors external of the discipline, including federal legislation and directed appropriations, developing education theories, growing emphasis on professional specialization, increased employment opportunities for women, and a redefinition of women's familial role served to redirect the focus of the field.

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