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How Germany Cleans: Housework between Social Norms and Sustainability

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abstract

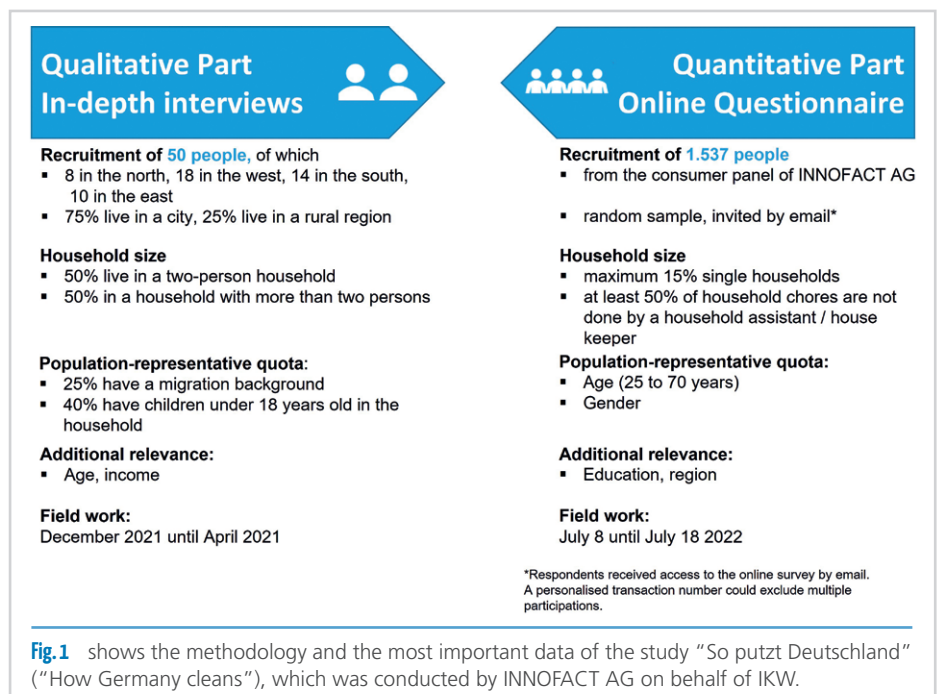
Housework is much more than “just cleaning”. The way cleaning is done allows conclusions to be drawn about social norms, behavioural patterns, the current emotional state and about the state of society. In this context, the Industrieverband Körperpflege- und Waschmittel e. V. (German Cosmetic, Toiletry, Perfumery and Detergent Association, IKW) commissioned a study from INNOFACT AG that examined the topic of housework from a holistic perspective.

The two-part study (1. qualitative part with 50 in-depth interviews, 2. quantitative part with approx. 1,500 persons, cf. **Figure 1**) provides an insight into the „cleaning behaviour“ in private households with more than two people. In each case, people’s self-perception, and the perception of others with regard to housework and the family and socio-cultural influences on cleaning behaviour were to be examined. The questions were, among others: What were and are role models? What motivations are there and how are the activities and roles in housework evaluated? Are there changes in the evaluation of cleaning compared to the past? It was also important to analyse the meaning and understanding of the ubiquitous term of sustainability in the context of housework.

Respondents were selected from the consumer panel based on the criteria and then by random sampling and invited by email. Access to the survey was personalised by a transaction number, so that multiple participations were not possible.

How the topic of cleaning is anchored in people’s minds

The assumption that each generation finds its own interpretation of everyday activities was not confirmed. In fact, “order” and “cleanliness” are deeply ingrained in the DNA of society (cf. **Figure 2**). Clean-



liness (82%) and order (72%) were already very important or important in the parental home for a large proportion of the respondents. There was also virtually no change in the current household. Both are relevant to an almost identical extent (cleanliness: 83%, order: 77%). Almost half of the respondents adopted many or all of the cleaning habits from their parent's home, and in the age group 25 to 34 years the number is as high as 62 per cent. In comparison, in the age group 50 years and older, "only" 41 per cent adopt parental habits. One reason for this may be that people learn primarily from role models.

We tend to notice people in the same household cleaning more often than friends or acquaintances. Mostly, the transfer of knowledge about housework and the associated habits therefore takes place from parents to children. From a sociological point of view, today's 25- to 34-year-olds also have a more friendly relationship with their parents than previous generations and one that is far less characterised by critical distance. This could result in an even stronger imitation of the cleaning behaviour by the younger age group.

Lessons learnt – children's help in the household

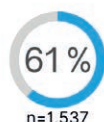
The topic „children's helping out in the household“ has hardly changed from "then" (in the parental home) to "now" (in one's own household). Even as children, most respondents (around 87%) were involved in household chores and 85 per cent now assign specific household tasks to their children (e.g., emptying the dishwasher). Only a quarter of the respondents had fixed cleaning days in childhood, especially the female respondents. At 84 per cent, boys had to help the main person in charge with housework at home somewhat less than girls (89%).

Imprinting and motivation – cleaning has an emotional component

Cleaning contributes to a sense of well-being. This is confirmed by 78 per cent of respondents who say that they feel they have accomplished something after cleaning. 70 per cent enjoy the cleanliness after the housework. 61 per cent of the cleaning behaviour in the household is intrinsically determined and controlled, i.e., it is mainly determined by one's own internal motivation. Especially the 25 to-34-year-olds show higher values for intrinsic motivation.

About half (51%) of the respondents are extrinsically motivated to do the housework, e.g., by the desire to be able to receive guests in a clean home (cf. **Figure 3**). For slightly less than half (42%), a visit is the immediate trigger to clean. In this context, it was repeatedly pointed out in the

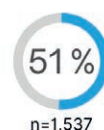
Intrinsic motivation



The desire for a clean and tidy household comes from within oneself, i.e., one

- enjoys housework
- feels better
- wants to live according to one's own values.

Extrinsic motivation



The desire for a clean and tidy household is determined by external factors, i.e., one

- wants (spontaneous) guests to feel at home
- does not want an untidy and dirty household to reflect on them.

Fig. 3 Slightly more than half (61%) of the respondents say that their motivation to clean is largely self-driven, while 51 per cent need external factors as motivation for housework.



in-depth interviews that order and cleanliness are expected by society. As a conclusion, it can be stated: Housework is perceived as a duty, but overall the intrinsic motivation clearly outweighs the extrinsic motivation – both in the in-depth interviews and in the quantitative online survey.

Social norms: The understanding of roles changes slowly

On average, 64 per cent of respondents from private households with more than one person do all the housework, with women (79%) significantly more likely to do so than men (48%). Apart from the fact that the respondents either overstate or understate (the figures do not add up to 100 per cent), the numbers suggest that the main burden lies with women.

As expected, this classic division of roles in cleaning was still very strongly cemented in the parents' generation. For about half (51%) of those who grew up in a home with a father and a mother, one parent took care of all the housework, mostly the mother (98%). This circumstance is found especially among the older respondents aged 50 and above. Among younger respondents, both parents shared duties significantly more often (62%). The subdivision into individual age segments shows that the understanding of roles is weakening in small steps: In the generation aged 50 and above, 99 per cent stated that the mother did the housework alone, and in the 25- to 34-year-olds it was 96% (cf. **Figure 4**).

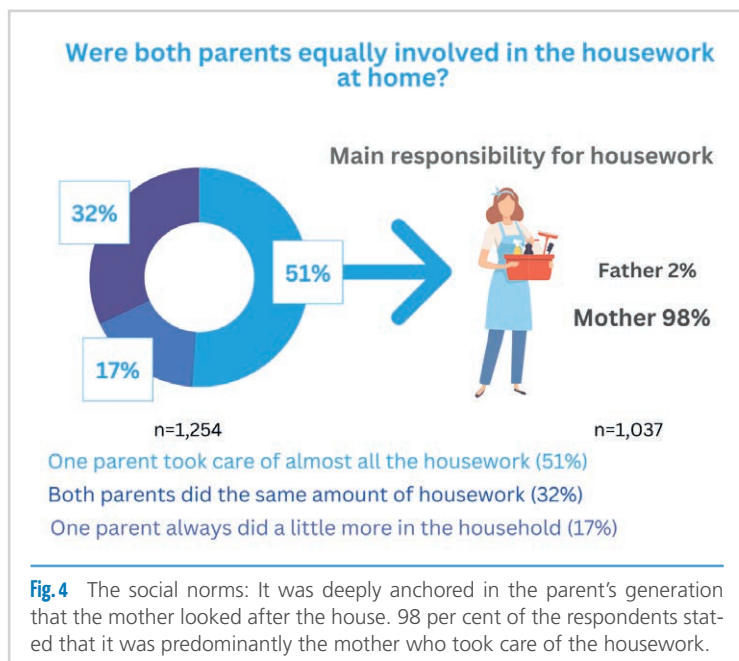
Sharing household care: Younger people and East Germans distribute housework more evenly

A different picture emerges among the younger generations and in East Germany. If the results are broken down by East and West, striking differences emerge: two-thirds of respondents (68%) from the new federal states say that both parents have taken on household tasks – in 28 per cent even in equal shares. In the old federal states, on the other hand, less than half (45%) say they do the housework together – and in equal shares only 15 per cent. Encouragingly, for the vast majority (70%) cleaning is rarely or never a topic of dispute in the household (cf. **Figure 5**).

Cleaning changes over times

Social norms have shaped roles and habits, which rarely change, and when they do, more than half (54%) say it is due to a change in life situation. The main reasons given were the acquisition of a pet (18%), followed by an addition to the family or a relocation (14% each). The in-depth interviews showed that the relevance of „cleanliness“ increases, and „order“ decreases when a child moves in. For 12 per cent, the

coronavirus pandemic caused a change in cleaning behaviour between 2020 and 2022, and for half of this group, it became established. Mainly cleanliness and order have gained in importance. However, a different or clear distribution of tasks played only a small role in the change in cleaning behaviour.



Sustainability between relevance and implementation

In recent years, no topic has gained as much importance as sustainability. But what does "sustainability" mean in the individual areas of life, specifically in housework? For most respondents, sustainability means above all "using environmentally friendly products". The in-depth interviews also show that the consumption of products, purchasing, the reduction of

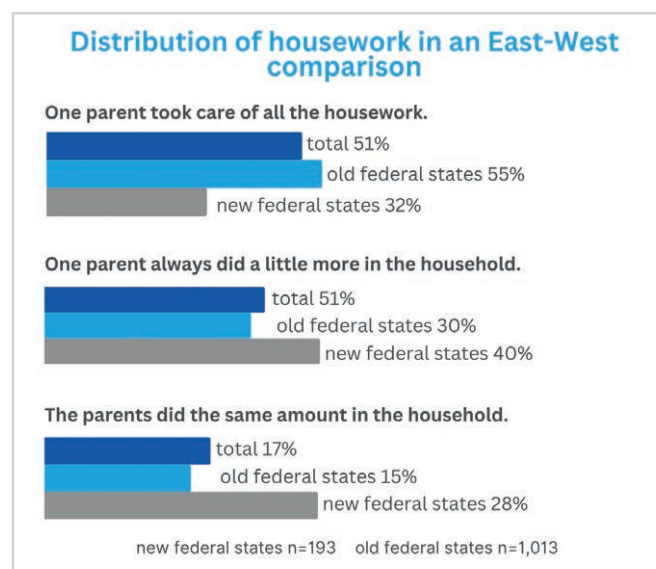


Fig. 5 In the new federal states, 68 per cent of the housework in the parental home was done by both parents, in 28 per cent of the cases equally. In the old federal states, 45 per cent did the housework together and 15 per cent equally.

packaging waste or the use of energy-efficient technical devices are considered relevant. The priorities are clearly distributed here: Sustainable behaviour comes easiest to the interviewees where they have the most influence – while shopping and doing housework, and least in the topic of mobility. Respondents pay the most attention to the economical use of washing and cleaning products (74%) and the use of energy-saving programmes (73%). The main motive for sustainable behaviour in the household is a long-term cost saving, followed by preserving the value of objects in the household (72%) and a contribution to environmental protection (64%). A possible social contribution, such as adequate remuneration of employees at cleaning product manufacturers, follows with 60 per cent. Higher costs are cited as the biggest barrier to more sustainable behaviour, especially among respondents under the age of 35. Young people in particular often have tighter budgets. Furthermore, this age group has doubts about “green” product claims (whether these are in fact true) and whether individual sustainable impacts can be achieved at all.

Digital aids for housework only relevant in certain areas

While digitalisation has long been a true reality in banking transactions or everyday communication, it seems to play a subordinate role in housework.

Digitalisation makes its way to housework – through the back door

The use of a cleaning schedule is not relevant for most multi-person households. Only just under 20 per cent follow a strict cleaning schedule with a concrete distribution of tasks; the majority loosely divide up tasks that arise (over 80%). Among those who do have a cleaning schedule, 89% have it on paper (cf. **Figure 6**). The in-depth interviews revealed the following explanation: It is obvious when something or a certain room needs to be cleaned, so digital tools are not needed for this. However, the benefit is seen sporadically, e.g., when parents want to remind their children of assigned chores.

Mopping and vacuuming robots – what is used for cleaning?

In principle, digitalisation has made its way into housework. Household appliances have been upgraded in the development of smart homes, e.g. washing machines and dishwashers that can be controlled by



smartphone. People think about vacuuming and mopping robots, but they do not yet have broad acceptance. In the in-depth interviews, respondents stated that they are unsure whether the robots actually clean everything as they had wished.

The assessment that cleaning agents and household appliances are indispensable correlates, as expected, with the frequency of their use. For the majority of respondents, dishwashing detergent (85%), toilet cleaner (84%) and glass cleaner (72%) are indispensable. The top household appliance is the washing machine with 92%, closely followed by the dishwasher (71%). The top tool is the cleaning bucket.

The report on the study “So putzt Deutschland” (“How Germany cleans”) can be accessed via <https://www.ikw.org/services/ikw-studien/so-putzt-deutschland-haushaltspflege-zwischen-sozialisierung-und-nachhaltigkeit> or scan the QR code:



The QR code leads directly to the IKW homepage from where the results can be opened or downloaded as pdf file or a presentation.

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