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# Gendered Food Practices from Seed to Waste



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# Editorial

## *Gendered Food Practices from Seed to Waste*

During its 36 years of existence our *Yearbook of Women's History* has never actually addressed the issue of food as an overall theme. This is surprising for several reasons. Not only are women the first to offer food to newly born human beings because of their biological gender, but food continues to have a central place in the lives of humans through daily rituals and customs, and in secular and religious holidays which symbolize the gender roles of men and women in dishes, food and drink. Other aspects of everyday food practices are equally highly gendered. Certainly nowadays, commercial advertising in virtually every part of the world is overwhelmingly targeted towards women by advising them on healthy food while offering products for keeping a slim figure. This in turn connects to overtly gendered beauty ideals which are conveyed through photographs of skinny fashion models who, reportedly, live on two double espressos a day. At the same time, older age groups are told that food supplements help keep up the vitality of the body, while slowing down the natural ageing process.

Hence, an issue about food has been a desideratum of the editorial board of the *Yearbook for Women's History* for quite some time. The importance of food in understanding cultures in different countries has been studied for decades. While early anthropological accounts already examined gender differences in food-related customs in what they considered 'primitive societies', analyses of eating, food and gender, date back to the 1970s at least, only to have grown in importance over the years. From 1996, these topics have also been addressed in the important journal *Food, Culture & Society: An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, as it is now known. Our volume on *Gendered Food Practices from Seed to Waste* was edited by Bettina Bock and Jessica Duncan, two experts who approach food scholarship from a socio-agricultural background. They are based at The Rural Sociology Group of Wageningen University, a highly renowned agricultural university in the Netherlands, and are experts in the field of sustainable food production and consumption, food policy and food security. The volume engages with the many different ways in which gender relations and cultures influence different aspects of food practices. The guest editors brought together authors from many different countries and expertise from a wide array of fields such as sociology, history, anthropology, agronomy, East Asian and American studies as well as practicing consultants from the field. This has given this volume an extraordinary richness in geographical scope. To emphasize the many different aspects around food the

contributions have been structured by using the following categories: *growing, storing, selling, preparing, consuming, dissemination/education, valuing* and *disposing*.

So, whether you will become intrigued by analyses of Roman and medieval cuisine as studied by professor of Medieval History Johanna Maria Van Winter in the Netherlands in the 1960s, or by the phenomenon of healthy food blogs on the internet today, or by the theatrical roles of Japanese women playing wasted food: We hope that this volume will whet your appetite for more!

We would like to thank Saskia Bultman for the English editing and Paulien Schuurmans, who left our editorial board in July 2016, for her input and assistance during the first preparations for this *Yearbook*.

*Eveline Buchheim, Saskia Bultman, Marjan Groot, Evelien Walhout, Ingrid de Zwarte*



# Gender and Food Practices

## From Seed to Waste

BETTINA BOCK & JESSICA DUNCAN

In nearly all societies gender has been and continues to be central in organizing the production and consumption of food. How the roles and responsibilities are divided along gender lines, and which activities are seen as particularly important in defining gender norms and identities, differ in time and place. Some activities seem to be perennial and omnipresent, such as women's responsibility for preparing food for the family – and maybe the strength of that relation originates from the archetypal image of the mother nurturing her infant. Other activities and identities are more variable. Food production, for instance, has long been associated with masculinity in the global North<sup>1</sup> but has lost strength in its association with manhood through time, probably also because of the loss in economic importance and visibility of primary food production. It is also widely assumed that in the global South farmers are predominantly men, whereas this is true only for market production and even there this assumption is losing validity. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)<sup>2</sup>, it is actually women who produce more than 50% of all food grown worldwide, with women representing up to 80% of the agricultural labour force in sub-Saharan Africa.

The strength of associations between food and gender-specific practices is also reflected in the images used for advertising food. We see gender stereotypes in the role models used to sell typical food items, such as the mother preparing food for her family, the male farmer proudly presenting his potatoes, or the male doctor explaining why some food choices are more healthy than others. The use of femininity and masculinity to sell certain food items reveals that also food itself may be gendered.<sup>3</sup> Red meat and barbecues communicate traditional masculinity, often with some association of outdoor adventure, whereas healthy/vegan food is generally associated with female beauty, youth and fashion. Last but not least, it is the distribution of food which tells

us a lot about who has more or less power and status. Katharina Vester formulates it as follows:

Foods associated with prestige are commonly assigned to the powerful, strong, or wealthy; less prestigious foods are assigned to those who are less appreciated, marginalized, or powerless. Examining who eats what, therefore, helps explain how power is structured in society.<sup>4</sup>

It is the strength, variety and complexity of gender and food associations, which inspired us when designing this issue of the *Yearbook of Women's History* on gender and food. It is our aim to demonstrate how wide and variable these associations are and how complex and contradictory they can be when following and unravelling their predominance in time and space.

We chose everyday food practices as an entry point to explore this topic. Such an approach allows us to look into the great variety of food-related activities along the lifecycle of food, from seed to waste bin. Or as expressed in our call for papers – from food growing to processing, selling and serving and from buying, cooking and eating food, to cleaning and disposing of the remains – all with a view towards gender in intersection with other markers of difference. We consider these activities to be social practices, which means that we aim to understand them as embedded in social structures and cultures, which differ in time and place. Studying how their enactments vary and develop provides insights in how gender relations and ideologies unfold.

In the following, we give a concise overview of the present body of knowledge about gender and food, the predominance of certain topics and its variation in entry points. We then introduce the contributions to this yearbook. We close with a brief reflection on how these contributions add to our understanding of gender and food practices.

### *Gender and food research*

There is not one body of knowledge when it comes to gender and food. As already alluded to above, gender and food research is divided across several fields which represent different topics, ask different questions, often depart from different theoretical and disciplinary entry points, and focus on distinctive samples of food practices or different stages of the above presented lifecycle of food.

### *Food growing*

Gender and food-growing has been an important field of study since the 1970s when Esther Boserup published her seminal book on *Women's Role in Economic Development*.<sup>5</sup> The book describes women's integral role in economic production and agriculture, and criticises modernisation policies, which undermine women's position in farming

through their focus on men as 'the' farmers. Esther Boserup inspired countless studies into not only the gender-specific division of farm and household labour in the global North and South, but also into the unequal access to resources such as land, machinery and other novel technologies, and the adverse effects of development and innovation policies on gender relations.<sup>6</sup>

Studies from across the world underline time and again that women importantly contribute to food production by providing agricultural labour as family members or paid workers, through their engagement in subsistence agriculture or as (singular and joint) farm managers, as women are increasingly taking over the management of farms, either *de facto* or *de jure*.<sup>7</sup> Agriculture is feminising in the global South and North. In part, this is a result of male outmigration and men searching for off-farm work to complement household income, leaving women to take care of the farm. In the global North the rise of the female farm manager is also due to an increasing number of daughters continuing the family business or women entering a managing team. Both go together with a shift in farming styles as it is often women who are interested in developing new types of farming, oriented towards quality production or so-called multifunctional farms which combine food production with other activities, including the processing and the direct sale of food, social care or tourist activities.<sup>8</sup>

Research into the gendered division of labour on family farms has gradually expanded to questions around the organization of paid farm labour and employment in agricultural corporations. Whereas family labour is clearly organized along the lines of gender, age and generation,<sup>9</sup> paid farm labour is clearly organised by gender, race and class. In the global North, agricultural labour is increasingly done by migrants, men and women who are often working under precarious conditions in terms of payment and labour conditions.<sup>10</sup> In Europe their countries of origin are often Eastern-European or African, whereas in the USA Mexican migrants prevail. In the global South, and Latin America in particular, it is the poor peasant men, women and children who work in multinational agricultural corporations and plantations. In Africa it is also formerly independent farmers who have given up their smallholdings to find paid employment in plantations.<sup>11</sup> Entering paid employment gives access to cash income and as such may initially add to economic independence. At the same time, giving up farming means that one now fully depends on employment for food security. This is risky also because of the often exploitative labour conditions with little labour security in corporatist agriculture.

Recent reports by the FAO and the World Bank point out that gender inequality contributes to food insecurity and that increasing gender equality would boost productivity. 'If We Invest in Women, They Can Feed the World', is the message of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.<sup>12</sup> Or, in other words: promoting gender equality is not only good for women; it is also good for agricultural development.<sup>13</sup>

Estimates are that granting women equal access to resources could enhance food production by 20-30% and could reduce hunger by 12-17%.<sup>14</sup> The data highlights the levels of inequality that exist between genders when it comes to accessing natural resources. It also raises questions about why calls for gender equality have to be

framed around increases in food production. Why is gender equality for equality's sake not enough? That said, supporting gender equality by reinforcing women's productive role in food practices is instrumental to assuring global food security: it enables us to ensure food security for a growing world population.

Empowered farmwomen also contribute to poverty alleviation because of their reproductive role, their responsibility for feeding the family and for childcare and education. Research has demonstrated that women who become economically more independent through their engagement in micro business, tend to invest the extra income in the household, in more and better food and in school education – whereas men have been found to spend extra income on themselves.<sup>15</sup> Such research promotes the empowerment of women, yet also reconfirms, time and again, the very same traditional and colonial gender images – the good mother and the unreliable Southern man.

It is feminist researchers, such as Andrea Cornwall, who have reopened the debate on the instrumentalization of women in response to the recent interest in gender empowerment by established institutes such as the FAO, the World Bank and the CGIAR organisations (formerly the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research). She warns us that framing women's empowerment in this way may easily work to the detriment of women. Supporting women's access to income is not sufficient to realize empowerment she says:

For all that they acquire spending power by becoming the entrepreneurs that development intervention would turn them into, women may find themselves unable to envisage the kinds of changes that could bring them greater empowerment, precisely because prevailing social norms and limiting self-beliefs conspire to restrict their ability to re-imagine the horizons of the possible.<sup>16</sup>

She admits that feminist researchers have contributed to this development when using arguments such as poverty alleviation to promote gender sensitivity in research and policymaking.<sup>17</sup> Now, however, it is important, in her view, to make sure that gender projects contribute to fundamental transformations and shifting power relations by engaging methodologies that support critical thinking, that question taken for granted norms and that strengthen the collective agency of women.

Cornwall has also repeatedly called for the need to look beyond women when calling for gender equality.<sup>18</sup> Besides inviting men in, it is necessary to better understand the complex ways in which inequality in farming is not only organized along the lines of gender, but also age/generation, race and class. This again means that more gender equality may also be in the interest of (in particular young) men and calls for a substantial shift in the multidimensionality of power relations.

### *Processing, selling and serving*

Research on the processing, selling and serving of food reveals that also this stage in

the food chain is organized along the lines of gender, race and class. Employment in the food processing industry concerns mostly lower-status and lower-paid work, in which those who are prepared or forced to work hard for little money are predominant – and these are often migrants and/or lower-class women and men.<sup>19</sup> In food retail the situation differs depending on the size and organization of shops. In supermarkets the lower-paid jobs are again done mostly by women, yet increasingly also by students who work in flexible part-time jobs. Managers tend to be men, yet there also many small stores set up by migrant families who sell mainly ethnic food and in which often the whole family collaborates.<sup>20</sup>

When it comes to serving food outside the home a similar picture may be found with gender, race and class organizing work. It is especially lower-class women, migrants and men and women of colour who serve food in schools, hospitals and prisons, as well as fast food outlets and lower-end restaurants.<sup>21</sup> Yet the managers tend to be men, and so are the waiters in high-end restaurants.

### *Buying and cooking*

The gendered-ness of buying and cooking food in the private domain is an important body of research in itself. The research reminds us that the work of feeding the family is usually seen as ‘naturally’ a woman’s task and part and parcel of being a mother.<sup>22</sup> Such assumptions carry with them huge responsibilities for the physical and psychological health of all family members, and it is often mothers who are blamed when children are eating unhealthily.<sup>23</sup> Research in this area looks into the importance of breastfeeding, women’s knowledge of healthy eating and cooking, the changing practices around cooking and eating, and their health effects. It includes research-based health and nutritional science and public health, as well as social sciences and gender studies.

In science, as well as in policy and practice, the responsibility for eating healthily is generally appointed to women as they are expected to be the ones doing the cooking and, hence, the ones deciding what to cook. This already starts with breastfeeding infants, which is nowadays presented as the very best start into a healthy life, with continuous educational campaigns meant to encourage breastfeeding among women in the global North and South. Lack of breastfeeding is seen as bad mothering and calls for intervention and research.<sup>24</sup> In their role as family feeders women are expected to decide what and when to eat, yet research also demonstrates that women feel the need to adapt to the preferences of others and in particular men, at times due to fear of violence following from serving undesired food.<sup>25</sup> It is also women who are expected to ensure the food security of their families, sacrificing their health by abnegating their own needs.<sup>26</sup> It is generally men who are given the best food, which is legitimized through their role as breadwinner.

Cooking is an important element of feeding the family and getting to know how to cook was long considered important for girls. Women were taught by their

mothers, and for many years it was also an important subject in school. Besides this, there were cookery books which told women how to further develop and refine their cooking skills and how to serve food in a way that kept their families and husbands happy.<sup>27</sup> Who cooks what for whom is also clearly informed by race and class. Cooking food from home is an important way for migrant families to preserve their culture.<sup>28</sup> With whom we share food demarcates lines of class and race,<sup>29</sup> and the same goes for what we cook and eat – as Bourdieu already taught us. This of course also has to do with resources and the ability to afford and access certain types and quantities of food. This again clearly matters in terms of food security and health equity, and informs life chances in terms of survival and development capabilities.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, who cooks the family meals reflects social change. With women entering employment we see fathers starting to cook at home – initially occasionally, preparing special food in special ways – on weekends or outdoors – more like a hobby than as a normal and regular task.<sup>31</sup> In two-career families, in which both partners work, men are gradually starting to prepare family dinners more regularly, although cooking does not necessarily become a shared project or responsibility.<sup>32</sup> In a recent article, Szabo demonstrates that men's engagement in home cooking may reproduce hegemonic masculinity – making them 'a real catch' – even though the changing division of labour may suggest otherwise.<sup>33</sup> In high income families hiring domestic help is another way to solve the problem of reconciling work and care. It is often migrant women and/or women of colour who are engaged for different tasks inside the home, among which the buying and cooking of food.<sup>34</sup>

Professional cooking, in the public domain, is as gendered as home cooking, only with reversed roles. Chefs are generally men, especially in high-end restaurants, whereas women are dominant in serving and cleaning or as cooks in lower-end restaurants or canteens.<sup>35</sup> Here, again, gender clearly intersects with class and race for what regards paid reproductive labour in general, and work in restaurants more in particular.<sup>36</sup>

### *Eating*

There is also a growing body of research that looks into the performance of gender through the act of eating and not eating. What and when to eat and when not, is an area of great concern for many women and girls already at an early age,<sup>37</sup> with continuous worries about achieving and maintaining the right body, about discipline and about gaining control over the urge to eat. Feminist writers have elaborated on dieting as an instrument of suppressing women, captured in the title of the famous book by Susie Orbach *Fat is a feminist issue*.<sup>38</sup> Since then the obsession with eating and body weight seems to have only increased, as reflected, for instance, in the rise of eating disorders among men and boys. How to look and what body to present is seen as one's personal responsibility, and eating the right food has become an ever more important way to build this body.<sup>39</sup>