
Gender Norms and Food Behavior

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Synonyms

Body; Cooking; Dieting; Eating; Economic; Farming; Fat; Femininity; Masculinity; Nutrition; Obesity; Sustainability

Introduction

Hilde Lindemann (2000) points out that philosophical theories are often based on a flawed picture of society in which the private sphere is utterly isolated from the public sphere – a distinction going back to John Stuart Mill – and what is done in the private sphere is often erroneously considered no fit subject for issues of ethics or justice, certainly not of politics. A classic example is that caregiving by family and friends is seen as a matter of personal obligation but not of justice or politics (feminist treatments of dependency work critique this stance). Like caregiving, many food behaviors occur within this private sphere as people cook meals, grow vegetables in small gardens for supplementation or subsistence, consume meals, or keep food animals for subsistence use or informal trading of eggs and milk. Such “private” food behaviors occur in every society, in both urban and rural settings in the global north and the global south, and are often performed by women. By comparison, food production and preparation which occur within the public sphere – on farms, in restaurants, and so forth – are far more visible and more easily counted and acknowledged in economic calculations (Waring 2004).

Food behaviors, both private and public, are deeply affected by gender norms concerning both masculinity and femininity. In some ways,

food-centered activities constitute gender relations and identities across cultures (Counihan and Kaplan 1998). This entry provides a non-exhaustive overview of how gender norms bear on food behaviors broadly construed, focusing on three categories: food production, food preparation, and food consumption.

Food Production

Food production can differ widely in various economic settings within and between nations. Gender norms governing control and ownership of business, as well as roles in policy-making, routinely mean that even women who are engaged in agricultural work in the public sphere have little say in its conduct. Those engaged in agricultural work in the private sphere, through the use of home gardens for supplementation or subsistence, find their work to be invisible to standard economic measures (Waring 2004).

Carolyn Sachs warns against overgeneralization about rural women involved in agricultural work, noting that they are diverse in race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. Yet, she argues rural women do suffer from institutional subordination in agricultural work around the world. State agricultural policies regarding domestic and foreign programs have typically supported what she describes as “patriarchal family farms” through extension loans, government loans, development aid, and marketing policies (Sachs 1996). These farms, for good or ill, have been disrupted as large-scale industrial agriculture increasingly provides for the food production needs of domestic and global markets. Sachs argues that this will not necessarily benefit women, however, because – as with so many corporate structures – few women hold positions of power in agro-industries (those who do are likely to be those whose race and class already provide them privilege): “Rather, such systems tend to exacerbate class, ethnic, and racial differences and privileges in rural areas and often rely heavily on the cheap labor of working-class people, especially racial and ethnic minorities” (Sachs 1996).

Such commercial work, being conducted in the public sphere, at least receives economic valuation even as it tends to benefit men more than women and some women more than others. Supplemental food production – backyard vegetable gardens or the keeping of chickens for eggs – and subsistence farming are utterly invisible to traditional economic measures (Waring 2004). As Sachs (1996) notes, studies on sub-Saharan Africa report that women produce roughly 80 % of the food and provide household water by transporting it from pumps, wells, or waterways. Though critical to family welfare, subsistence farming remains invisible economic-based policy measures. Since gender norms dictate that “private” food production be done overwhelmingly by women – carrying water in particular is seen as work for women and girls – their role in food production is often simply irrelevant to those in power even as it is deeply relevant to their families. Meena Bigli attests that 70–80 % of the Pacific Rim’s working women work in the agricultural sector, yet many countries continue to focus on men as planners and decision-makers for agricultural policy and problem-solving, nor are women targeted for capacity building and education in the sector (Report of Women Major Group 2007). Similarly, Signora Maria Francisca de Belo Assis noted that rural women farmers in developing nations such as her own Timor-Leste need to compete in the market economy but do not have adequate information and are not included in decision-making. She argues that this is necessary in order to make rural and sustainable development a reality (Report of Women Major Group 2007).

In the United States, there is a movement to bring more women into agricultural work as business owners, especially in the sustainable food industry. However, even this is fraught with gender norms. Costa (2010) carefully notes that women have long been underrepresented in the public sphere with respect to agriculture despite the work they do at home and outside the home with respect to food production, planning, and preparation. Women indeed do a great deal of work on food production, both as farmers and advocates, comprising 61.5 % of the employees

and 60 % of the executive directors of the top 15 American nonprofits focusing on sustainable agricultural issues. And yet, it is gender norms that drive the success of women in this field: by way of explanation, Costa (2010) notes that women are mothers of children, are nurturers of health, and have the largest impact and concern when it comes to what they feed themselves, their families, and the wider community.

Sustainability has come to be seen as an appropriate women’s issue, as has the quality of crops and meats. While this increases women’s involvement in agricultural policy, it too is based on gender norms. As Marilyn Frye (1983) points out, women’s anger and passionate concern are most likely to be given uptake when it falls within an appropriate, gender normative sphere of concern. With respect to agriculture, concerns over food safety for women’s families, and the condition of the world left behind to their descendants, are just such concerns.

Gender norms often keep women from economically and politically powerful positions in the public sphere of food production despite their work in both public and private food production. Exceptions most often occur when the ways in which women seek power over food production line up nicely with gender norms about their proper role in caring for others.

Food Preparation

Food preparation, like food production, is structured by the flawed private-public divide. Though reinforcing that divide is problematic, it is useful to point out how that divide plays a role in the way that both masculine and feminine gender norms shape food preparation behaviors. On the private side, we have home cooking and service cooking by volunteers working in community settings such as churches or food charities. On the public side, we have commercial cooking performed in restaurants, hotels, and schools. Gender norms affect food preparation.

Home cooking is a loaded activity in Western cultures and around the world, often heavily

gendered (Reiheld 2008). It is often considered women's work and feminized according to gender norms, seen as properly the duty of women; where home cooking is acceptable for men, it tends to be masculinized or is seen as a "favor" or supererogatory. An influential review paper of research on gendered division of household labor in America found that nearly two-thirds of total housework hours are spent cooking and cleaning, work which continues to be – and to be seen as – much more often the purview of women than men (Bianchi et al. 2000). Both cooking and grocery shopping show similar patterns in many studies and many developed countries (Lippe et al. 2011), including the Anglo-heritage countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Dixey 1996; Breen and Cooke 2005). In particular, highly educated and married women in masculine cultures do less paid work and more housework such as cooking than do their counterparts in more feminine cultures (Lippe et al. 2011).

This gendering of cooking as women's work begins early in American culture, as the division of children's chores shows: in families with both boy and girl children, girls are more likely to be assigned cooking and cleaning chores while boys are more likely to be assigned maintenance chores such as mowing the lawn or repairing things or taking out the trash. Both children's and adult's divisions of household work in the United States follow gender lines, and both children and adults generally do not question such stereotypical divisions (Schuette and Killen 2009), no less so with cooking.

This goes beyond Europe and Anglo-heritage countries. In 1974, O'Laughlin (Furst 1997) reported that in many non-Western societies, men did not do the cooking and had never learned to cook because doing women's work was considered shameful. In one society, cooking was defined explicitly as women's work, and the pots as women's tools, so much so that men were looked upon as no longer men if they used the cooking pots.

However, in Europe and the Anglo-heritage countries, there are certain kinds of cooking that are gendered masculine. One of these is

barbecuing outdoors on a grill or an open flame, especially when cooking heavy meats such as steak. In America, men often take great pride in being good at the grill, as depicted in numerous television ads, but are rarely depicted doing the regular cooking which tends to be gendered feminine.

Regardless of how often gender norms dictate that men should occasionally cook, gender norms also still hold women responsible for the nutritional status of their household. However, doing so ignores how deeply access to food, cooking skills, and cooking time are situated in class, culture, race, and gender. Nowhere is this more apparent than in public health campaigns over obesity and childhood nutrition. Breastfeeding campaigns by the Department of Health and Human Services in the United States, for instance, use slogans such as "breast is best" and, more recently, "babies were born to be breastfed." As Rebecca Kukla has pointed out, the strategy of such campaigns focuses on women as the only relevant moral agent who needs to be convinced; if only such campaigns could reach women, it is assumed they would change their behaviors. Yet, women are overwhelmingly aware of the evidence that babies are healthier when breastfed. Kukla points out that this underlying assumption – that women simply haven't been convinced yet – ignores the vast array of constraints on women's lived experience that restricts their ability to breast-feed, including but not limited to lactation difficulties, workplaces which do not allow adequate maternity leave or facilities to pump breast milk, social stigma against public breast-feeding, and lack of safe spaces in which to breastfeed. Kukla argues that "there are many American women, especially women from the socially vulnerable groups least likely to breastfeed, for whom breastfeeding is not in fact a livable choice" for reasons that go beyond barriers to the very culture that is in fact asking women to put their babies' nutritional needs first (2006). This has potential bearing on UNICEF's initiatives to increase breastfeeding globally, some of which attempt to involve those around mothers rather than aiming squarely at mothers.

Breastfeeding is not the only way in which women are held responsible for the family's nutritional status, however, especially in the context of rising obesity rates in both the global North and South. A quick survey of articles published on children's nutrition shows that those addressing mothers consider food preparation (and the mother's own food consumption) as well as maternal income, whereas those considering fathers solely or as well as mothers focus on paternal income's impact on the nutritional status of children. In the United States, women still make the primary healthcare decisions in two-thirds of American households and are primarily responsible (in two-parent heterosexual marriages) for making the kids' doctor appointments and conveying them to and from appointments. This responsibility for family health in general is consistent with what Joan Wolf (2007) calls an ideology of "total motherhood" in which mothers are held responsible for any harm that may befall their children. This extends to nutrition, at which point the family becomes the site of intervention with women responsible for that intervention (Lupton 2013), and not only in the United States. In the 1990s, children in Nepal faced widespread vitamin-A deficiency which can have serious health consequences. Health experts recruited grandmothers – who had time to get the pills out and authority to make sure they were taken – to distribute nutritional supplements. As of 2005, 48,000 grandmothers distributed vitamin A to 3.5 million Nepalese children. Development agencies often give resources or money for children's health to women in the family, knowing or suspecting that men are more likely to spend it on themselves (Kluger 2010). Dixey (1996), writing about nutritional programs designed to teach healthy cooking and eating skills in the face of rising obesity, cautions against targeting only women and girls with opportunities to learn how to provide healthy food lest cooking skills come to be seen as part of an attempt to re-create traditional gender roles.

Such attention to women as responsible for family health has obvious pragmatic benefits, since dominant gender norms mean they are best situated to improve family health. As with

breastfeeding, however, this general responsibility ignores the situatedness of women's decisions about food acquisition and preparation. Aphramor and Gingras (2009) note that dieticians who advise patients and caregivers on improved eating focus overwhelmingly on "eating plans" and individual agency over them when assisting women in combatting obesity for themselves and their families. This individualistic approach, they say, conserves a "limited, consumerist, and decontextualized understanding of health and fatness in which issues of power, inequity, and gender remain peripheral and occluded," creating a "theoretical desert" with little real hope of achieving health. As an example, we might consider the limited access many Americans have to fresh fruit and vegetables, as exemplified in the US Department of Agriculture's conception, and maps of "food deserts," areas in which access to food is restricted to prepared food and very little fresh food. Abigail Saguy (2013) notes that our assessment of women as food preparers in the private setting is deeply embedded in race and class. She gives the example of Katherine, a young anorexic white woman whose mother drops everything to whip up a three-course meal if Katherine says she is hungry, an example we often view approvingly. However, by contrast, a poor black single mother may lose custody of her son as he gains weight despite her best efforts to take him to the Y and ensure he eats healthy food whenever she can watch him given her time-consuming minimum wage job. As Saguy notes, the white family is considered to have a daughter with a terrible illness while the black family is treated as having a son who suffers from neglect (Saguy 2013). Such assessments are insensitive to class concerns and race issues, especially given the vast disparities in time and resources. Lack of attention to issues of class or geography inappropriately places blame for unhealthy food preparation on individuals who, because of gender norms governing food preparation, are overwhelmingly women around the world.

It is not only nutritional status for which women are held responsible when it is assumed they cook but the very nature of the family. Anglo-heritage nations have long – but not

always – depicted cooking, and housework more generally, as a source of feminine virtue and a duty to family (Reiheld 2008). Recent rhetoric over family values in the United States has urged families to have more sit-down meals, on both public health and moral grounds. With respect to the latter, it is claimed that families are more functional, and a flourishing and good life more attainable, when family members have dedicated time together without the interruption of television, telephone, or portable computing devices. The burdens of preparing sit-down meals fall on women, whom we have seen are generally held responsible for meals the world over. Indeed, a large survey of British women found that they had adopted the norm that “the proper meal” confirms the family as a “proper family” and is, by definition, made by the wife (Furst 1997). In such ways are the norms of domestic femininity often constituted by food behaviors.

Reinforcing the importance of the private-public divide for how cooking is evaluated, Furst notes that cooking may be understood as an expression of “a rationality of the gift,” in which the production of use-values in the home is seen as a gift to loved ones. It should be noted that this notion of cooking as a gift makes it a private matter nearly immune from critiques of fairness which might be levied on an exchange of goods or services that takes place in the public sphere. By contrast, Furst presents “the rationality of the commodity” which governs production in the market. Since food production in the home, still largely performed by women due to gender norms, has no market valuation for reasons discussed by Waring (2004), this form of “women’s work” has far less social value than cooking performed in the public sphere which is visible to markets. That work, while sometimes performed by women, has high-status variants in the form of professional chefs. Chefs and heads of staff in commercial kitchens remain overwhelmingly men. As Furst puts it, when men do the cooking, it is mainly public cooking, the food of money and prestige. It is important to add to this, however, the above-noted fact that when men do home cooking in the private sphere, it is

more often than not highly masculinized with fire, meat, and so forth.

Gender norms strongly affect food preparation behaviors, in ways ranging from division of this labor to holding women responsible for the health of their families and whether the family is a good one. Gender norms also relegate women’s food preparation predominantly to the private sphere, while men’s food preparation is masculinized, often higher status, and generally in the public sphere.

Food Consumption

Food consumption behaviors are no less governed by gender norms than food production or food preparation. And since everyone eats – though not everyone produces and prepares food – food consumption behaviors are perhaps the area in which it is easiest for most people to see how their behaviors are affected by gender norms.

Perhaps the most obvious way is with dieting. Sandra Bartky (1998) influentially describes femininity, and its associated gender norms, as a “disciplinary regime” governing the state of feminine bodies, requiring training so as to achieve normative shapes and habits. She questions the public-private divide and argues that where gender norms – especially those of femininity but also of masculinity – are concerned, there is no real distinction between the public and the private: we must keep in mind that the Second Wave feminist slogan “the personal is political” applies also to the “production of the ‘properly’ feminine subject” (Bartky 1998). Dieting is, for Bartky, a paradigmatic disciplinary practice of femininity. If we take dieting out of the Western context of striving for taut, small-breasted, and narrow-hipped bodies, it can apply to any disciplinary form of eating in order to achieve whatever the feminine norm might be even if that norm is the large-bodied “traditionally built lady” of Botswana described in Alexander McCall Smith’s popular No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency novels. The goal of dieting, regardless of the specific body-shape norm, is of a “properly” feminine body.

Bartky noted a still-true fact that the majority of American women and girls – and an increasing percentage of men and boys – report being on a diet at any given time. One might attribute this to health concerns in a world with increasing obesity except that diet products and even public health campaigns routinely urge smaller bodies rather than healthy eating, and media are filled with promises of rapid weight loss rather than improvements in cholesterol, diabetes risk, or other health indicators. Dieting to restrict calories, as Bartky says, “disciplines the body’s hungers: appetite must be monitored at all times and governed by an iron will.”

Persons who appear to have “failed” at this discipline, who have bodies too fat by some standards or too thin by others, are regarded as actually unable to control their own appetites; as Susan Bordo says, the overeater becomes a libertine (Bartky 1998). Abigail Saguy (2013) illuminates how class and race further complicate such judgments, arguing that stereotypes of African-American women as having unbridled appetites inform discussion of their food consumption and body weight. Drawing a wall of separation between the disciplined and undisciplined disrupts the possibility of social solidarity between women of different body types, and to the extent that fat people are also poor minority women, discussions of irresponsible “fatties” shore up prejudices against women of color (Saguy 2013). It is worth noting that in cultures where larger, even fat, bodies are considered the feminine ideal, it is in part precisely because access to more calories allows such a body to be produced. Access to more calories, and the discipline to consume them no matter your body’s own signals, then indicates both discipline and relative wealth. Gendered expectations for bodily discipline, shaped also by race and class, make failures of those whose bodies appear undisciplined.

While men are far less subject to the need to discipline their bodies with respect to norms of masculinity, nonetheless, this does affect men. Achieving the masculine body norms of visible muscle tone and definition can require dieting, but most certainly requires not only exercise but

a certain kind of exercise aimed at producing a certain kind of musculature. Masculinity, too, is a disciplinary regime aimed at producing the “properly” masculine body. For men as for women, lack of discipline becomes an individual failing.

Gender norms driving food consumption apply not only to body size and calorie consumption but also to what is considered appropriate for men or women to eat. Some elements of French culture view fish as inappropriate for French men to eat because the flaky texture of fish must be eaten in small mouthfuls and chewed gently in a way that contradicts French norms of masculinity (Furst 1997). Women in many Anglo-heritage and European nations are expected to eat salads; it has recently been noted that Internet image searches for a person eating salad are almost universally images of happy, laughing women eating salad. This means of consuming this particular food comports with culture-specific gender norms of self-discipline and feminine bodies. Examples of gendered foods abound, and social status is lost for men if they eat feminine foods in feminine ways, gained when they eat masculine foods in masculine ways. Women, by comparison, lose status by eating masculine foods in masculine ways and retain it by eating feminine foods in feminine ways.

As with self-control and will in food preparation – whether breastfeeding or family cooking – food consumption is deeply affected by norms about both bodies and foods, norms whose nature and application are highly gendered and deeply embedded in culture, class, and race.

Summary

The public-private distinction, though of dubious utility, plays a significant role in how gender norms govern the three food behaviors considered here: food production, food preparation, and food consumption. Norms of domestic femininity are commonly constituted by food behaviors. The impact of gender norms on food behavior is often complicated by issues of culture, class, and race. Several gender norms are of particular

importance, especially norms which make women responsible for others, specifically within the traditional private sphere, and gender norms which make women responsible for conforming their own bodies to ideal standards of femininity.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Body Image, Gender, and Food](#)
- ▶ [Child Nutrition Guidelines and Gender](#)
- ▶ [Ecofeminist Food Ethics](#)
- ▶ [Farm Management](#)
- ▶ [Food Advertising to Children: Policy, Health, and Gender](#)
- ▶ [Food Culture and Chefs](#)
- ▶ [Food, Class Identity, and Gender](#)
- ▶ [Gender and Dieting](#)
- ▶ [Infant Feeding](#)
- ▶ [School Lunch and Gender](#)
- ▶ [Sustainable Consumption and Gender](#)

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Gender, Obesity, and Stigmatization

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Synonyms

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Introduction

Obesity is defined and identified in a number of ways, depending on whether it is in a medical,