

for
HUNGER-
PROOF
CITIES

Sustainable Urban
Food Systems



Edited by Mustafa Koc, Rod MacRae,
Luc J.A. Mougeot, and Jennifer Welsh

For Hunger-proof Cities

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Gender and Sustainable Food Systems: A Feminist Critique

Penny Van Esterik

Introduction

Food touches everything and is the foundation of every economy. It is a central pawn in political strategies of states and households. Eating is an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family, and community relationships. Food sharing creates solidarity; food scarcity damages the human community and the human spirit.

Across history and cultures, women have had a special relationship between food and appetite, on the one hand, and body image, eating, and sexuality, on the other. Women, through the everyday routines of family meals, are the transmitters of cultural codes pertaining to food and eating (most of the great chefs in the commercial arena, however, have been men). Arguing for the centrality of women and food in industrialized societies sometimes poses a problem for feminist analysts who see the dangers in essentializing women and overstressing their nurturing capacities.

In this paper, I summarize some of the linkages between women and food and suggest how feminist analysis may further our understanding of the food system. In an earlier paper, I developed the idea of food praxis (Van Esterik 1991) but did not connect this with women; later, I explored the relation between women and nurture (Van Esterik 1996) without considering praxis. Here, I begin the task of integrating gender and praxis, concluding with an attempt to define a feminist food praxis as a conceptual tool to guide further research and action.

The link between food and women's identity and sense of self

Women's sense of self is often based on their ability to feed their families. As a basic part of their self-identity, this right may become even more important to women in conditions of rapid social change and food insecurity. This source of power and identity may be lost when women lack access to food, when others take over from them the right to feed their families, or when efficiency is valued more than empowerment. Women do not necessarily lose this power when others share the responsibility for household food security and contribute labour to this end. But for women who are normally responsible for providing food for their families, the experience of being unable to feed their children is tantamount to torture (and food deprivation is a form of torture). Therefore, hunger and food insecurity must be considered part of the violence

that women experience and must be explored as a violation of human rights (see Waring 1996).

If culture inscribes bodies, it is food that leaves the clearest mark, and that mark is most often read on women's bodies. Of central concern in Western cultures is fat. In industrial societies, women's relation to food is problematic because of the linkage between food and body image in diet-conscious women. Anorexia and other eating disorders primarily of women are becoming more prevalent in Western societies. Even young girls are expressing dissatisfaction with their bodies. Psychological research confirms that women who eat smaller meals are commonly perceived as being more feminine, better looking, and more concerned about their appearance than those who eat larger meals (Chaiken and Pliner 1987). A study in northern England found that women viewed food as a treacherous friend: "they desired it for the pleasure it gave but denied themselves the pleasure because of the unacceptable weight gain that might result if they indulged themselves. At the same time, it was a comfort, a support in time of need" (Charles and Kerr 1988, p. 142). The complex of stress, depression, and compulsive eating among women is also well documented (Chernin 1981). Rage leaves women hungry for food and justice.

Gendered food ideologies

How do our relations with food develop? Clearly, food socialization must be strongly gendered. In a study of 10-year-old American children, Roos (1995) found that for girls, food is a symbol for friendship and connection, but for boys it is a means to express dominance and competition. In some societies, children are socialized to share food from a very early age, particularly with their younger siblings. Food socialization is critically important for understanding gendered food ideologies.

Feminist theory

Feminist theory is broadly based in the social sciences and humanities, and it informs activism in support of gender equality. Following the usage of South Asian groups, I define *feminism* as theories and actions that aim to end discrimination on the basis of gender, race, class, and ethnicity. I make use of four feminist principles:

- Theory and practice are inseparable.
- The personal is political.¹
- Diversity and differences are resources: there is no one truth.
- Nonoppositional, nondualistic thinking is basic to theory.

Feminists, not surprisingly, have resisted making too close a link between women and food; it is a troubled relation and one that will draw feminist fire if it is not analyzed with care. Women's association with food is not a simple one — as we know from the many women suffering from eating disorders — and cannot be reduced to the notion that food work is "naturally" women's work. Fears of essentializing women and

¹ I was once told by a man that I should not take things so personally; how else is there to take anything?

of reducing them to food or to food providers have kept many feminists from delving into this relationship.

Some Western feminists see food as relevant only to the domestic sphere of social reproduction. They place a higher priority on redressing the imbalance of power in the sexual division of labour (having men take on more responsibility for cooking, feeding, and nurturing) and on more fully accounting for women's labour in food production. Latin American women's groups have successfully established collective kitchens, but "some feminists have been critical of these women's self-help organizations because they focus almost exclusively on traditional women's tasks and do not challenge the traditional division of labour" (Safa 1990).

Breaking down oppositional thinking is an important part of feminist theoretical reorientation. It opens the door to reintegrating everyday practice and objective scientific knowledge. Cooking as "thoughtful practice" blends theory and practice, body and mind; it reflects the way many women experience food — not as nutrients, but as nurture. The study of food and eating has been marginalized because of Western binary logic, which favours mind over body, theory over practice, abstract over concrete, object over subject, public over private, and reason over emotion, among others (Curtin and Heldke 1992).

Women are both vulnerable and powerful — victimized and empowered — through food. Feminist nondualistic thinking about food reminds us that ethnocentric oppositions such as production and reproduction, public and private, and self and other are a Western legacy of blinkered, binary thinking. Food practices confound the dichotomy between production and reproduction and between public and private and are part of both the formal and the informal economy ("both ... and," not "either ... or"). The special case of breast-feeding makes this clearer. Women's bodies are simultaneously a means of production and a means of reproduction — producing babies and breast milk. This is both productive and reproductive work and is both a public and a private act. Other food practices confound the dichotomies between production and reproduction and between public and private. The task of preparing meals cannot be reduced to a private act of social reproduction when the food may have involved substantial bartering and exchange in the public sector, be redistributed in community potluck dinners, and be exchanged as leftovers with neighbours. Are these public or private acts?

Eating and cooking break down these oppositions. But our disciplinary borders still keep us in separate boxes, defined by these same oppositions. The medical and the gastronomic are separated — cure and cuisine are separated — and this division further separates the professional expert from the layperson, usually the laywoman (see Curtin and Heldke 1992). Cooking and eating, feeding the self, and feeding others concern metaphor, pattern, and system and call for an epistemology of relationships between people and between people and their food, not an epistemology of cause and effect. Lineal causality is inappropriate to the world of living organisms, which adapt, relate, and learn, rather than reacting to laws. Mechanistic metaphors fail to effectively explain relationships, holism, or synergy. Cooking, feeding, and eating are metaphors for interdependence, nurture, mutual support, and pleasure in a world full of metaphors for independence, greed, ambition, and pain. Terms like *nurture*, *reciprocity*, and *intimacy* have no meaning without context, but they require a paradigm shift in thinking.

Development of a feminist food-praxis model

I call this paradigm shift the search for a model of feminist food praxis. Ironically, food praxis refers to the practical “mastery” of the routines of producing, preparing, and consuming food. Building from the basic feminist principles mentioned above and the myriad ways in which the food system is gendered, I propose the following 10 points as a place to begin:

1. Feminist food praxis builds on gender-sensitive assumptions about women as gatekeepers of the food system and mediators between food produced and food consumed. But women’s association with food, feeding others, and cooking is culturally constructed and not a “natural” division of labour. Nurturing skills are acquired by those who nurture others most often, with the exception of breast-feeding, the paradigmatic act of nurture.
2. The core of a feminist food-praxis model is the need to eliminate hunger and ensure sufficient food to sustain and reproduce gendered bodies. Political forces control people’s access to food by permitting corporate interests to profit from delocalization by encouraging food hegemony. Feminist food praxis thus requires an examination of women’s power in relation to the food system.
3. A feminist food-praxis model is nonreductionist, combining materialist and symbolic explanations of behaviour. Components of the food system — economic conditions, ecological context, or cultural categories — are not ranked so that one has primacy over the others but are considered parts of an integrated whole within a particular social, historical, and spatial system.
4. A praxis model takes the perspective of the social actor or the social collectivity and examines the relation between agency and structure. The system acts on the individual and the individual acts on the system, providing both micro- and macro-perspectives on the food system.
5. Food praxis explains both change and continuity. Change may emerge from individuals acting out of habitual routines, producing intended and unintended results that change *habitus* (or dispositions), which in turn change material conditions and interpretations of those conditions. Continuity results from the stability of routines of food production, processing, preparation, and consumption.
6. Food praxis defines the temporal organization of these routines for food procurement or production, preparation, distribution, consumption, and waste disposal. Cooking, feeding, and eating are high-periodicity tasks that are nonpostponable and occur with a high frequency. Breast-feeding and complementary feeding of babies are significant examples of this.
7. Cooking, feeding others, and eating are simultaneously sources of pleasure and a burden, and they blur the work–leisure divide. The tasks may be carried out by people exhibiting a wide range of skills. Yet, these activities may still be nurturing, if they are performed with warmth and affection. Thus, a model of feminist food praxis considers the way an act is performed, not simply the act itself.
8. Cooking, feeding others, and eating are body-based acts that create relationships between people. Most are reciprocal, in that they benefit both the giver and the

receiver of food. Food praxis focuses on food sharing, intimacy, commensality, nurturing, and reciprocal exchange. These are, therefore, deeply implicated in cultural constructions of the body and are emotionally loaded (for example, feeding the elderly and the very young).

9. Praxis theory is broadly reflexive, encouraging critical reflection on how “our” food choices affect “other” food systems. Scientific work does not proceed independently of the subjectivity of the analyst in feminist food praxis.
10. A feminist food-praxis model assumes that knowledge can be used to improve the quality of human life, as well as human diets; it is thus a potential guide to advocacy action.

Conclusions

Bateson (1972) argued that environmental problems stem from technological progress, population increase, and errors in thinking. Errors in thinking also present challenges to global food security. Feminist food praxis is one small step to changing our mind-sets about food systems. It is up to local practitioners to determine whether viewing the food system through a feminist framework will inspire the political will to develop innovative interventions to improve food security for women and, ultimately, for children and men as well.

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