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Reflections on the politics of gendered food chains

K. Amaya

abstract

Throughout history, social relationships surrounding food have traditionally been divided along gender lines. That the food chain is gendered from kernel to platter is therefore probably to repeat a truism. Afterall, the most fundamental form of care, providing food, is still mostly carried out by women in the majority of societies today. In addition, despite having a duty to feed others, women may in many geo-political locations frequently fail to do so providing for their own needs. In this perspective, I consider gender and food related-relationships by exploring gender dynamics in the modern agrifood system. Firstly, I investigate the relationship between food and women's subjugation and the sublimation of feminist consciousness. Secondly, I ask, how gender relations related to food are configured in the context of three categories of food – material, socio-cultural, and corporeal – that characterise women's interactions with food (Allen & Sachs 2007). In each of these areas, gender is expressed in ways that I argue reflect women's social disadvantage. Linkages between women's work with food in the fields and labour market, their responsibilities for food provision in the care economy, and relationship with eating are explored. It is argued that these are integral to the field of food studies and research which has tended to ignore the normalisation of 'women's work', undervalued domestic reproductive and productive labour. Integrating feminist studies with political economy can provide food studies with a theoretical framework that is able to throw light on some of the critical elements that shape gender relations in the agrifood system. Critical food studies, it is asserted, need to focus on steps women are taking to unsettle the existing oppressive power relations in the agrifood system.

keywords

food, gender, feminism, food studies, agrifood system

Introduction

Several writers have explored how the meanings of food and gender identity are interwoven, even contending that food-centred relationships have co-constituted some of the many commonly accepted meanings of gender. In this article I am interested not only in gender identity formation but women's location and work in the production, distribution, consumption, and symbolism of food (Counihan & Kaplan 2013; Avakian & Haber 2005; Fischler 1988). Though women have the control

over the majority of food-related work in the domestic sphere and in the South perform much of the subsistence production of food to support their families, and also comprise a substantial number among paid workers in the global agrifood industry, their power in decision making in the home, in the agrifood industry and in food policy is negligible.

In order to understand these contradictions clearly, the article explores the significance of gender in food chains. The term "food chain" is used in a double sense: to

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analyse the literal sequence of food production, distribution, and consumption and also to explore women's inescapable responsibility for reproductive work with food for their families and how their relationship to food and eating metaphorically "chains" them to food (Counihan & Kaplan 2013).

The sublimation of feminist consciousness in relation to women's subordination in the food chain, begs the question whether gender has been engaged by food and feminist scholarship and how. There is no shortage of literature on gendered eating habits and body politics as a result of exploitation by commodity capitalism. This narrow focus has helped to conceal significant gaps in the literature on structural problems, despite evidence of women's multiple exploitation in the public sphere, and the little that is said on the need for feminist-driven analysis and social transformation of gender and the food system (Allen & Sachs 2007).

The study of food, once a subject limited to nutritionists, has by necessity expanded to interdisciplinary approaches over the last few decades. The fervour surrounding new scholarly research on food, cooking, and eating recalls the early 1970s surge of interest in women's studies (Avakian & Haber 2005). Food studies, like women's studies, is an interdisciplinary field that incorporates attention to the daily lives of ordinary people within its purview. Until recently, however, few food studies scholars applied a gendered or feminist lens to their work. Feminist scholars were intent on pathologising women's relationship to food consumption and studying the consumption of market-driven messages targeting women's bodies.

Not to say that research into anorexia, bulimia, and other eating disorders in women is not important for women's health and wellbeing, however, several other aspects of women's food relationships are at least as important. Similarly, domesticity was addressed by feminists and women's studies scholarship, but food preparation and cooking were overlooked as another indicator of exploitation in a gender system and thus unworthy of attention. Similarly, food studies in anthropology, sociology, nutrition, and agricultural studies have neglected or contorted what

could be understood from and about women's food practices. Despite the fact that women are central to food practises, the focus on women and a feminist analysis are rare (McLean 2018). Even when a new interdisciplinary approach named feminist food studies came into the limelight, the approach was focused on the North. According to Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber (2005), the contributions of third-world countries in this approach are hardly obvious.

Avakian and Haber (2005) have noted the paucity of food studies' scholarship that has addressed gender as it intersects with other social identities, particularly in relation to race, colonialism, and globalisation. They make this observation in their seminal text, *From Betty Crocker to a Feminist Food Studies: Critical perspectives in women and food*. Until their publication, few writers and post-colonial feminists were conscious of this discipline. There may have been awareness of the associations between food and gender, however, of the many works written about food and gender, the majority did not have a critical feminist consciousness (Avakian & Haber 2005), that is recognition of the need to question and unsettle the oppressive gender and other unequal relationships it embedded.

In the 19th and 20th centuries the feminist movement spread around the world. It was accepted widely as leading to a revolution in the relationship between the sexes in history. Yet this movement glossed over the relationship between food and women: for these women, the term "food" was merely a tool for patriarchal oppression. Yet, this ignores the plethora of meanings and connotations it holds for a deeper and a more nuanced understanding of the normalisation of unequal gender relations and what society sees as 'women's work'.

Gender in the food chain

From farmers to farm workers

I assert that food is a key to women's subordination. Resistance to the exploitative material, socio-cultural, and bodily aspects of food should form a part of food studies. Unsettling male supremacy and global capitalism is in the interests of improved

health, social justice, and environmental soundness. Women's relationship to food is tied into social and gender roles and customs. It points to the gendered work division in food production generally.

An analysis of the gender links in the food chain situates Southern women at the centre of the processes, starting at the bottom level of production. Food production or farming is the most basic level of the human food chain. Here, primary significance falls upon the women food producers of the South or developing countries. According to data from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, the majority of economically engaged women in the least developed nations are employed in subsistence agriculture. The responsibilities that women have in agriculture differ from country to country and from region to region. Women perform between 60–80% of the labour in sub-Saharan Africa's food production for domestic consumption (State of Food and Agriculture (SOFA) Team & Doss 2011; Allen & Sachs 2007). Women in Africa are primary food producers for their families, heavily involved in planting, weeding, harvesting, etc.

Allen and Sachs (2007) identified five aspects of gender inequality that affect women in agriculture for the attention of critical feminist food studies. They list land rights, productive resources, unpaid work, wage employment, and exclusion from decision making. In addition, a lack of training opportunities for women and the technological advances in the global agrifood industry threaten the productivity of women small-scale and subsistence farmers.

Discussion of food and gender in the 20th and 21st centuries inevitably shifts the terrain of traditional meanings of food production to industrial processes and the agrifood system, the complex of institutions and structures that define, regulate, and shape the organisation of agriculture and food from the harvest of crops to consumption at the table (Allen & Sachs 2007). The production, processing, storage, trade, distribution, and consumption of food fall under the umbrella of the agrifood chain, which includes people and organisations engaged in agricultural food production and processing. In the agrifood system a

focus on the role of women falls now more often on women's exploitation as wage labour, rather than as workers on their own land. In a male-dominated society the invisibility and undervaluing of women's work, takes place not just in the household but in the fields, expanding the scope of food studies to women's experiences as farm workers.

Women's work in the agrifood system as unprotected wage workers in less developed or low-income countries is another layer of the gendered relationship to food production that merits attention. Women's gender-specific labour exploitation is addressed by the International Labor Organization in a study by Carla Henry (2018) which highlights the vulnerability of women farm workers to sexual violence and harassment in commercial agriculture. Women workers reportedly may lose their jobs in situations when they resist workplace sexual violence and harassment. Women agricultural workers' subjection to sexual assault and harassment by male supervisors is also documented by Dolan, Opondo and Smith (n.d.) who reported pervasive sexual harassment of women workers on all the farms they examined in Kenya, where workers claimed that managers demanded sexual favours in exchange for employment, time off, promotions, and bonuses. Women workers believe they have no choice but to keep silent because there is no effective way to report such instances to management. At the base of the food chain, in formal production where women work as wage labour, women's inequality is frequently expressed in their job insecurity, vulnerability to discrimination and violence without recourse to justice or trade unions.

Feminism has proposed that power disparities between men and women in the workplace and society are a reproduction of gender relations in the domestic realm. The home and family are a primary space in which women's roles as producers are undervalued, where unequal relationships occur and also determine access to resources among others.

The care economy

One of the most important links in the food chain for food studies has been the

domestic realm. In the family ecology, women traditionally perform the role of the primary producers as they must feed others as care takers of the family and the elderly. Food studies do not necessarily make the critical observation that the reproductive labour that is undertaken is unpaid. Rather, it is seen as a cultural universal practice of care and sustenance, for which the majority of women are responsible. Needless to say, this relationship draws on domestic economies of care, as well as mental, and physical labour.

Lewin (1943), one of the pioneers in the study of 'women's work' with food, stated that the role of 'feeding' had provided women with power since they served as gatekeepers, as the regulators of the flow of food into their houses. Although the theory of women as household gatekeepers dominated for more than 50 years, contemporary scholars of household food provisioning (McIntosh & Zey 1989) question the extent to which women's responsibilities as household food providers really confer authority. Rather, women who work long, often unappreciated hours in the food and agriculture industry tend to find their subordination reinforced in the home. *Feeding the Family*, the landmark study by De Vault (1994), placed the spotlight on the major gendered role performed by women in society providing for others' needs. The acknowledgement of women's contribution to their families, as Kemmer (2000) notes, has nonetheless tended to support their subservience and other family members' entitlement.

Cooking, as a form of provision, is a mental as well as physical activity. De Vault (1994) argued that women must be aware of the dietary preferences of their family members, schedule the time and place of meals, and stay current with the complex and rapidly evolving information regarding nutrition and food safety. In the study of the social organisation of caring, class distinctions were observed that related to the varying availability of time among women. While less time-hungry middle-class women sought out new recipes, time-hungry working-class urban women tended to rely on 'fast' or convenience foods (De Vault 1994). Not only class but race and ethnicity shaped different women's relationships with food. This is

evident in the production of food by cultural minorities, Gullah women, African American women, and Jewish women, among many others, that is documented as being a way for women to maintain marginalised cultural traditions and memory. Women's relationship to food is thus woven into sentiment and emotional meanings and frequently speaks to much more than mundane necessity or the contingency of provision (Beoku-Betts 2013; Narayan 2018).

With an assumed degree of unmediated household power, women were positioned to exercise some choice over food (De Vault 1994; Kemmer 2000). In reality, the task of food provision is seldom unmediated by the negotiation for resources for household food needs. In many households, the organisation of cooking and eating, the content and timing of meals is around the head of the household (Bell & Valentine 1997). When wives have no control over their husband's food expectations and tastes, they frequently face unfavourable outcomes, from minor disputes to domestic abuse. In fact, the act of buying, preparing, and serving food is well recognised as a major catalyst for violent acts in the home (Ellis 1983; Murcott 2005; 1983), again situating women's relationship to food, not as unproblematic provision, but as the butt of oppressive household gender power relationships.

Corporeal meanings of food: commodity capitalism and the body

Even while women are socially positioned as carrying the primary responsibility for feeding others, they frequently neglect their own dietary requirements for a number of reasons that reveal the effects of their insecurity over a need for social approval and gender inequality, not food shortage. The power of capitalism and the market to manipulate diet, not in the interests of health or nutrition, in this instance is via the manufacture of media for women's consumption to secure brand loyalty to beauty products. The market's circulation of the constructed ideal body image has become the direct cause of widespread eating disorders. Whether it is their age or weight, many women are persuaded by the market to be dissatisfied with the way they look (Paquette & Raine 2004). It has

been estimated that a girl will have received over 250,000 commercial messages by the time she is 17 years old, and the average woman exposed to 400 to 600 adverts every day (Morris & Katzman 2003). The majority of these messages advocate physical attractiveness and desirability as complying with an impossible beauty ideal, including being underweight, either explicitly or indirectly (Ballentine 2005). The diet industry thrives on women's insecurity and a fixation with thinness to maintain unachievable body weights inside the machinations of the agrifood system. The number of girls and women who are on diets has increased dramatically such that dieting has become a typical female lifetime obsession (Mellin, Irwin & Scully 1992). In addition to being strongly gendered, eating disorders are now widely prevalent and class-specific. According to Bordo (1993), many women who can afford to eat a healthy diet in the North, carry the burden of hunger in order to gain social approval.

Gender identity and socio-cultural meanings of food

Cultural precepts frequently play a role in society's muted acceptance of gender disparities. It is no wonder that the separation of practice and theory from the tasks associated with food has helped to establish and confirm a "gender order" (Allen & Sachs 2007). The question of how food and gender are integral to identity formation was taken up by French sociologist Claude Fischler (1988). He asserted that food can be considered to embody difference as well as to be "constitutive" of gender-differentiated bodies. Fischler has argued that eating firstly helps to create the idea of an individual identity since each person assimilates the qualities of the food in their own unique way and is subsequently integrated into a culinary system and a social group (1988). As a result, food constitutes subjectivities both literally and figuratively, namely in socio-cultural identity formation. Starting from the premise that if women give birth, then men create, the binary of "reproduction vs. production" reappears, even subtly, in the case of a cooking style (for example, barbecue) that has historically been associated with men and has only recently been open to women, at least in western environments. In contrast, women

symbolically remain anchored to the domestic space (which represents family and care) when they "work with food" (produce, prepare, cook). Outside of this space, men are able to dissociate themselves from "domesticity" and from all the symbols associated with it, even when they perform and act inside the domestic space. This example of the normalisation of 'women's work' leads us to the binary gendered scheme. Mauriello and Cottino's (2022) argue that "places of food" become symbolic spaces where one can exercise power and define one's subjectivity within a gendered frame in a more or less explicit manner. They are also locations where one can establish the boundaries of one's range of action in a given space. It is no accident that areas where food is prepared, whether they are kitchens, fields, or lands, might be off-limits to those of the opposite gender, suggestive of embedded power relations linked to food-centred activities of men and women and their identities (Counihan & Kaplan 2013).

Food studies, without a gender lens or feminist analysis, take no account of the multiple gender inequalities that exist in the food chain and that are evident in the agrifood system, where women's inequality and exploitation is justified and normalised by a gender division of labour. This relationship is embedded in socio-cultural food practices reflecting how gender differentiation is established and embodied through food, extending to exploitation of women's body image by the market and widespread food disorders, socially produced conditions of hunger. By reading how food imagery and food politics function in these circumstances, one can begin to unpack how violence is enacted at the intersections of colonialism, classism, racism, and sexism.

Women-centred food ecology

Feminist consciousness on the environment has pushed women to confront ecological systems and food production. In India, the traditional women's principle of food production is based on the intimate relationships between animals, the environment, and crops, and more specifically on how women work to uphold these relationships. Agriculture modelled after nature and

based on women's interaction with nature has proven to be self-reproducing and sustainable, according to ecofeminist Vandana Shiva, because internally recycled resources supply the essential seeds, soil moisture, soil nutrients, and insect control. Vandana Shiva is a physicist, environmental and food sovereignty activist and anti-globalisation advocate. She founded the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, and Navdanya, an organisation which promotes biodiversity conservation, organic farming, and the rights of farmers. Shiva has critiqued modern science and technology as a western, patriarchal and colonial project, which is inherently violent and perpetuates structural violence against women and nature (Shiva & Bedi 2007). In general, women farmers in the developing world are regarded as small agriculturalists who provide the foundation for food security. Most importantly, they do this in collaboration with other species.

Women have always played a part in the food system, but they are now taking on expanded roles as the material, socio-cultural, and physical conditions are not fixed. Their activities come in a variety of shapes and sizes, from small-scale individual acts to large-scale union organising campaigns or participation in agrifood social movements (Shiva 2014). The oppressive and exploitative conditions that women experience as paid labour in the food system have been resisted by women. For instance, migrant workers' children's day care and schools are among the causes for which women farm workers have organised. They also advocate for farm worker health (Connor, Layne & Thomisee 2010). Women have organised around issues of livelihood and made government demands in the public sphere to reform the food system. Women have had a crucial role in creating and running food assistance programmes to fight hunger and poor nutrition, and women continue to take the lead in the fight to prevent cuts to public assistance programmes that help disadvantaged families around the world (Barndt 2003). Additionally, women have been instrumental in developing and advancing institutions and movements related to alternatives to agrifood. Large-scale initiatives to develop wholesome, environmentally sound, and

socially just food cultures and systems are also led by women. While some organisational initiatives include the government, the majority are focused on food consumption politics. Women are leading the way in ethical consumption, embracing local, organic, fair trade, and compassionate food. These initiatives include both collective and individual consumer and business owner actions, as well as some that combine the two. Women's organisations have also put up a fight against the societal pressures created by advertising that encourage many women and girls to engage in unhealthy eating habits on a physical level (McLean 2018).

The main food-related problem that has been taken up by the feminist movement is the concern with eating disorders. With the exception of body politics, there is a surprising lack of feminism *per se* in women's attempts to bring about change in the agrifood system, despite the multiplicity of women-led initiatives. I advance three reasons for this. First, even while the above-mentioned efforts are made by women, they are not necessarily "feminist" in the sense of opposing the exploitative and repressive character of unequal gender relations. Second, some of the initiatives emerging from traditional women's struggles may well work against feminism, especially Northern-centred feminism, which tends to hold distinct interests that exclude the South. Third, the domestic sphere of the home and material spheres of women and food are rarely addressed by the feminist movement, keeping practice and theory separate (Allen & Sachs 2007).

Rarely are feminist principles or analyses clearly included in women's initiatives to alter the food system. Instead, feminist organising initiatives have tended to emphasise women's participation in formal politics, women in the economy, and issues related to women's bodies and sexual and reproductive rights. Domestic violence has been a big feminist issue in the home, albeit it is rarely connected to the trigger that seems to be so important – food and meals. Instead of an organised feminist campaign, changing the distribution of work in the house or kitchen, it has primarily been about the struggle for women at the level of personal negotiation with their partners and other family

members over resources allocation for consumption in the domestic economy (Murcott 2005; McLean 2018).

Conclusion

By examining three interconnected and overlapping domains – the material, the socio-cultural, and the corporeal or physical – the gendered character and interactions of the food chain are hard to ignore. The understanding of women's relationship to food benefits from feminist scholarship's emphasis on the connections between gendered divisions of labour in the home and in the labour market as well as contrasts between the private and public spheres. While women perform food work in the formal, informal, and household economy as providers, their relationship to food needs to be troubled and analysed to unsettle the uncritical acceptance of what is understood as 'women's work'.

Feminist perspective theory, which contends that feminist social science should be carried out from the viewpoint of women in order to investigate and understand the institutionalised oppressions of women in society, must also be applied to women's experiences in the food system. The reality is that we need to learn much more about gender dynamics in the food system, whether they are a source of power occasionally or more frequently a source of subjugation. We need to learn much more about the work of female food activists as well as their goals and perspectives on the ecologies of the food system. We still have a lot to learn about the potential for transforming gender relations, and the burgeoning area of feminist food studies.

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