

Opinion

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Food and Gender: A Silent Inequality Served Up Every Day at the Table

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Introduction

When it comes to food, the discussion often centers on diets, calorie counting, nutrients, or recommendations for adopting healthy lifestyle habits. However, behind every food item that is produced, purchased, prepared, and consumed lies a much less visible yet profoundly decisive dimension: gender.

In the daily lives of households, markets, and kitchens, norms, roles, and inequalities are reproduced that determine who prepares meals, who decides what is eaten, who has access to healthy foods, and who takes on almost always unacknowledged the work of food care. Recognizing that food also has a gender dimension is not an ideological assertion, but a social reality supported by scientific evidence and fundamental to understanding the inequities that persist in health, nutrition, and food security.

Eating is a biological act essential to life, but it is also a voluntary process influenced by cultural, economic, and social factors; although it is rarely discussed, gender roles play a central role among these factors. Historically, social norms have assigned women the responsibility for domestic tasks related to meal planning, deciding on daily menus, purchasing food, and, above all, cooking, serving meals, and ensuring that all family members are fed.

These responsibilities have become so normalized that they often go unnoticed. In the collective imagination, women continue to be associated with household care and food preparation, while men's participation in these activities is usually considered exceptional. This unequal distribution of domestic work is not due to biological differences, but rather to a sociocultural construct that establishes behaviors considered appropriate for men and women.

The result is an intangible workload that falls primarily on women. Even though women's participation in the labor market has increased significantly in recent decades, responsibilities

related to food preparation and family care continue to be concentrated on them. This double shift places constant pressure on the time available for rest, recreation, health, and self-care.

Development

It is clear that socioeconomic status influences this reality. A review of the literature reveals that various studies have shown that families with higher levels of education tend to have a more equitable distribution of household chores. However, traditional patterns persist in many households, widening the gap in the amount of time devoted to unpaid work, which particularly affects women.

Gender inequality in food is not limited solely to the domestic sphere. It is also evident in food production. In many regions of the world, women play a fundamental role in agriculture and agri-food production. They are responsible for a significant portion of the planting, harvesting, processing, and marketing of agricultural products. However, they face significant disadvantages in accessing land, credit, technology, training, and markets.

Paradoxically, those who produce much of the world's food often have less access to the resources needed to ensure their own food security. This situation limits their productive capacity and reduces their opportunities for economic development. Furthermore, women farmers often occupy the least profitable links in the supply chain, earning lower incomes and facing greater risks in the face of economic, climate, or social crises.

These conditions have direct implications for food security. From a human rights-based perspective, every person has the right to sufficient, safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food to lead a dignified and healthy life. However, this right is not exercised equitably; in emerging economies, women and socially disadvantaged groups make up a significant proportion of the populations that is unable to fully realize the right to food.

Food insecurity has a woman's face. In contexts of poverty, economic crises, or social conflicts, women often adopt self-sacrificing strategies to protect other family members; it is not uncommon for them to reduce the quantity or quality of the food they consume to ensure that children, older adults, or other household members can eat adequately. As a result, they face greater risks of nutritional vulnerability, anemia, micronutrient deficiencies, and other health problems.

Compounding this reality are phenomena such as gender-based violence, which can limit economic autonomy and the ability to make decisions regarding the family's food supply. Under these conditions, they often experience higher levels of food insecurity due to financial constraints, economic dependence, or social isolation.

It has traditionally been assumed that, simply because they were born female, women lead healthier lifestyles and have better diets. However, this idea oversimplifies a much more complex reality: men and women are equally capable of adopting healthy or unhealthy behaviors regarding food selection and consumption. What differs is the social expectations that influence these behaviors.

Thus, certain cultural patterns may associate masculinity with higher consumption of meat, alcoholic beverages, or high-calorie foods, while women are expected to maintain dietary practices considered healthier or more moderate. These expectations shape dietary decisions and can pose health risks for both groups.

The transformation of contemporary lifestyles has also altered family eating dynamics. Today, changes in household organization have led to a greater incorporation of meals eaten outside the home and ultra-processed foods into the family's dietary pattern.

Although these changes may address practical needs related to time constraints, they also pose challenges to the nutritional quality of the diet.

Conclusion

Given this scenario, a fundamental question arises: What is the current situation regarding men and food? Is it perhaps unlikely

that they can live on their own? It is clear that more and more men are participating in meal planning, doing grocery shopping for the household, and taking on culinary responsibilities. However, these advances are still insufficient to achieve true shared responsibility for tasks related to food and care.

Building fairer food systems requires challenging the stereotypes that assign these responsibilities exclusively to women. Food security must be understood as a shared responsibility among all members of the household and society; the processes of selecting, purchasing, and preparing food are not activities inherent to a particular gender, but rather skills that can and should be developed equitably and for the sake of survival.

Promoting a gender perspective on food involves recognizing existing inequalities and designing public policies that promote equal opportunities. This includes strengthening women's access to productive resources, protecting their labor rights, reducing wage gaps, ensuring protection against violence, and fostering shared responsibility for domestic tasks.

In this context, it is necessary to promote educational initiatives that challenge traditional stereotypes and foster new forms of coexistence based on equity. When men and women share responsibilities related to food equitably, not only does family organization improve, but so does the physical, mental, and social health of all family members.

Food is much more than simply satisfying hunger for the sake of survival. It reflects social relationships, values, and forms of collective organization. Incorporating a gender perspective into the analysis of food helps bring to light historical inequalities that have remained hidden for far too long. More importantly, it opens the door to building societies where the right to healthy and nutritious food is a reality for everyone.

Because truly healthy nutrition depends not only on what we put on our plates, but also on the justice, equity, and dignity with which each food is produced, distributed, and shared.



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