

# WOMEN AND FOOD CHAINS<sup>1</sup>: THE GENDERED POLITICS OF FOOD

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## Introduction

Throughout history, the social relations of food have been organized along lines of gender. Today, in most societies women continue to carry the responsibility for the mental and manual labor of food provision—the most basic labor of care. Women's involvement with food constructs who they are in the world—as individuals, family members, and workers—in deep, complex, and often contradictory ways. Women perform the majority of food-related work, but they control few resources and hold little decision-making power in the food industry and food policy. And, although women bear responsibility for nourishing others, they often do not adequately nourish themselves. These longstanding contradictions are seemingly immune to the dynamism that characterizes nearly every other aspect of the agrifood system<sup>2</sup> in this era of globalization and innovation.

In this article we reflect on these contradictions, taking up three questions about gender relations in the contemporary agrifood system. First, we ask how the subordination of women and sublimation of feminist consciousness in relation to food has been engaged and explained in agrifood and feminist scholarship. We find a rich literature on body politics and gendered eating patterns, but substantial gaps in the areas of structural issues and social change. Second, we ask what are the configurations of food-connected gender relations? We discuss this within a framework of what we call food domains—material, socio-cultural, and corporeal—that define women's relationships to food. We find, unsurprisingly, that women are disadvantaged in each of these domains. This leads to our next question, what actions are being taken to change gender relations in the agrifood system? We look at the locations of women's agency in improving social and economic conditions in these three domains. While women are engaging in numerous important efforts to change the food system, these efforts are rarely coordinated. Neither are they generally identified as feminist projects, in the sense of being strategically oriented toward improving gender relations.

How can we work to better understand the complicated and contradictory connections between gender and food? Avakian and Haber (2006) have called for a new field of feminist food studies. For this field of study to emerge, the connections between women's food work in the labor market (material), their responsibility for food-related work in the home (socio-cultural), and their relationship with eating

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term “food chains” in a double sense. First, we are drawing on the scholarship of commodity food analysis (Barndt 1999; Dolan 2004). Second, we suggest that women's inescapable responsibility for reproductive work with food for their families and their relationship to food and eating, metaphorically “chains” them to food.

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<sup>2</sup> The agrifood system is the complex of institutions and organizations that define, regulate, and shape the organization of agriculture and food from field to table.

(corporeal) must be studied and adequately theorized. Until recently, these areas have been both understudied and unconnected, with little integration of the material, socio-cultural, and corporeal domains. Currently, feminist studies in the corporeal domain help to explain why gender relations remained so static in the food system despite the progress that women have made in many other arenas, such as medicine, law, and politics. However, other gender issues, including the relative absence of a feminist agenda despite women's increasing involvement in leadership roles in the food system, remain neglected. We suggest that weaving the strands of feminist studies together with political economy and sociology can provide strong theoretical grounding for a feminist food studies that would illuminate causes, conditions, and possibilities for change in gender relations in the agrifood system.

## **Theorizing the Connections between Gender and Food**

Women are occupied in and preoccupied with food on a daily basis, irrespective of class, culture, or ethnicity. While the edges of these occupations and preoccupations can blur, we find it useful to distinguish women's involvement in the food system in terms of material, socio-cultural, and corporeal. In discussing the material domain, we focus on women's labor in the formal labor force—women's productive labor outside the home and in the public sphere. In the socio-cultural domain, we are concerned with women's reproductive (usually unpaid) labor in the home and with their families, i.e., their work in the private sphere. Finally, the corporeal domain incorporates women's physical and emotional connections to eating and food, including the cultural forces that condition these connections.

Women remain disadvantaged in the material, socio-cultural, and corporeal domains of the agrifood system. Yet, while women engage in significant and far-reaching efforts to change the system, few of these efforts focus specifically on improving gender relations. How have these conditions been engaged and explained? Here we review scholarly contributions to our understanding of gender relations in the agrifood system. The most developed areas in terms of theorizing the connections between food and gender are the corporeal and socio-cultural domains, with fewer contributions in the material domain.

### ***The Corporeal Domain***

Feminist scholars have described and explained the ways in which women obsess about and are tormented by food. Women's identities are clearly tied to their often problematic relationship with food. Bordo (1998) suggests that women seek emotional heights, intensity, love and thrills from food. She also points out that the restriction of food and denial of hunger serve as central features of the construction of femininity (Bordo 1998). Bordo argues that most women who can afford to eat well are dieting and hungry almost all of the time.

Dieting, anorexia nervosa, bulimia, and obesity—all on the rise—mark the confused messages that women should have perfect (thin) bodies at the same time that they are encouraged to over consume and indulge in junk food. Advertising and media play an enormous role in perpetuating women's obsession with thinness. The media constructs idealized images of the thin and well-toned body and also promotes consumer products that help people, especially women, achieve this well-maintained body (Ballentine and Ogle 2005). Counihan (1998) points to many women's transformation fantasy—once I am thin everything will be fine. Being thin becomes a

panacea; women are socialized to believe that their problems come from being too fat. Counihan describes the quest for becoming thin as a pathetically reductionist channel for dealing with institutionalized powerlessness. Bordo's (2003) analysis of advertisements geared towards women finds that contemporary advertisements reveal continual and astute manipulation of women's dilemmas with conflicting role demands and time pressure. Messages for women emphasize mastery and control of the self compared to ads targeted towards men that emphasize mastery and control over others.

While the push for thinness may be media driven, women's social networks with partners, families, and friends also reinforce the media's message for acceptable bodies (Paquette and Raine 2004). Taken for granted and often well-intentioned social conventions of friendship and caring strongly influence women's body image. Women's body images are disciplined not by force, but through their own and others' critical gaze and surveillance. Thus, Paquette and Raine (2004) suggest that women will not be able to take control over their bodies only by resisting the enormous power of fashion, cosmetic, and diet industries. Everyday social relations and conventions and relationships with health care professionals must also change.

### ***The Socio-Cultural Domain***

Obsession with food is connected to another area of feminist food scholarship that centers on women's responsibility for feeding others. Food studies scholars hold contrasting perspectives on whether women's food work gives them power in the family or reinscribes their subordinate gender roles. Women's food provisioning represents their ties to family and also maintains cultural traditions that are at the heart of many women's identities. Anthropological studies of various countries, regions, and ethnic groups reveal how women construct their identities, cultures and class positions through food work (Counihan 2004; Devasahayam 2005). Women's daily work with food connects them in intimate ways with close relatives and friends. For example, newly arrived immigrant women in the USA attempt to maintain their culture by cooking Dominican or Indian meals, while women from upper-middle class families serve fresh fruits and vegetables and fine wines through which they display their class positions.

One of the first scholars to study women's work with food, Lewin (1943), argued that this feeding responsibility gives women power because they act as gatekeepers who control the flow of food into their households. Although Lewin's view of women as gatekeepers held sway for over fifty years, recent scholars of household food provisioning (e.g., McIntosh and Zey 1998) question how much power women gain from their roles as food providers. Food work can reinscribe women's subordination in the home as they put in long, often unrecognized hours working for others. In her 1991 hallmark study, *Feeding the Family*, DeVault documents women's central responsibility for feeding others. She argues that feeding work encompasses both physical and mental labor, although women often deny that feeding the family is work. She also observed that most women try to construct an "ideal family" through their caring/feeding work. Although as Kemmer (2000) points out, even through many women continue their efforts to construct this "ideal family," the structure of many families is not the traditional family, and women's service to their families reinforces women's subservience and other family members' entitlement.

Feminist theory has made multiple strides in examining the intersections between gender, race, ethnicity and class (Narayan 1995; hooks 1998). Rather than viewing women as a unified category, awareness of this intersectionality provides a more complex stance to understand women's work and lives. These intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and class define who does what work in the food systems and under what conditions. White, upper-middle class women entrance into the labor force has been facilitated by transferring their care work to other women who are often poor, immigrants, and women of color (Tronto 2002; Duffy 2005). Much of the preparation and serving of food is now been transferred from women's reproductive labor in the home to other women, often poor women of color, who prepare food in processing plants, grocery stores, and restaurants. Race and ethnicity also define the spaces where women work. White women tend to be concentrated at the public face of reproductive labor in the paid labor force, especially in jobs that require interaction; by contrast, women of color are disproportionately represented in dirty, back room jobs (Nakono Glenn 1992). Recent feminist work also explores how images and symbols related to food are intricately tied up with gender and race (Inness 2001).

### ***The Material Domain***

In the material domain, a number of studies of women in agricultural production have been conducted in recent years (see, for example, Whatmore 1991; Sachs 1996; Chiappe and Flora 1998). However, very few studies explore the material aspects of gender relations throughout the food system, despite an explosion of studies of commodity chains and globalization (e.g., Friedland 1984; Tanaka and Busch 2003; Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994). Since these analyses highlight who controls and who is vulnerable in global commodity chains, commodity chain analysis is ideal for studying gender relations in the food system. In practice, however, other than studies by Barndt (1999) and Dolan (2004), few efforts call attention to women's disadvantaged positions in the agrifood system. Gender analysis remains on the margins of the sociology of agriculture.

As the sociology of agriculture moves more towards a focus on consumption,<sup>3</sup> it would seem that gender relations would emerge as an obvious key problematic. Agrifood studies of consumption regard consumers as active agents in shaping the food system (Goodman 2003), and consumers, especially food purchasers, are typically women. Yet, the gendered construction of production and consumption practices remains a major omission in the debates over the relationship between production and consumption (Lockie and Kitto 2000). Studies of consumption in the sociology of agriculture typically view consumers as ungendered subjects. This focus on consumption is driven by a shift in the politics of resistance in the food system. With the diminished power of unions and the erosion of production-based politics, some view consumers as the new actors in challenging institutions (Gouveia and

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<sup>3</sup> The sociology of agriculture has long neglected the relationship between the production and provision of food. Scholars have typically viewed production as determining consumption, thereby justifying the neglect of consumers (Lockie and Kitto 2000). Despite the historical disregard of consumption by agrifood studies, efforts to locate food production and consumption in a more symmetrical analytic framework are currently underway (Goodman 2003). Recently, agrifood studies attempts to bring the consumer in through research on systems of provision (Fine et al. 1996) and actor-network theory (Murdoch 1994).

Juska 2002).<sup>4</sup> This scholarly turn towards consumption presents an excellent opportunity for increasing our understanding of women's connection to food.

## Resistance and Feminism

Feminist scholarship also provides complex understandings of resistance strategies. Resistance to neo-liberal globalization in the food system and gender relations with food comes in heterogeneous forms that are not necessarily connected to each other (Della Porta and Diani 2006). As with resistance to neo-liberal globalization in general, these activities include individual acts, workers' movements including organizing union activities, and organizing in the form of new social movements that focus on gender, environment, race, ethnicity, and consumer movements.

Women's efforts to resist and reshape the food system take multiple forms. Molyneux's (1985) distinction between practical and strategic gender needs forms the basis of much gender and development analysis (Moser 1989), but is rarely applied to women's resistance in developed countries. In the case of food, this distinction between practical and strategic efforts proves useful in the U.S. context. Women may act to meet their practical needs, such as access to healthy food, without altering gender power relations. These resistance efforts focus on helping women survive within the current structure. Women also act to meet their strategic needs—acts that involve altering gender power relations—such as equity in the workplace, shared responsibility for cooking, and healthy approaches to women's bodies. These efforts strive to change the core of the structure that subordinates women in the first place.<sup>5</sup> Attempts at resistance to the food system occur in both production and consumption politics. In the USA, many of these efforts are often not explicitly feminist or part of the feminist movement.

How do we explain the perplexing absence of a feminist agenda in women's actions in food-system work? One key factor is agrarian ideology, which tends to support and reinforce the subordination of women. Fink (1992: 196) characterizes the exclusionary nature of agrarian ideology stating that it has been "a white male vision that has failed to consider the full human integrity of other persons." he points out that agrarianism is a gendered ideology that projects different ideals for men and women. Women have been expected to support the farm, men, and children ahead of their own needs or aspirations. Focused on the nuclear family and the male farmer, agrarian ideology embodies traditional gendered roles and can pose a roadblock to raising issues of gender equality for both men and women. And, even though agrarian populism emphasizes the importance of democracy, populist organizing and solidarity were based on a traditional gender division of labor (Naples 1994). Women have long been rendered irrelevant in their roles as farmers. Several studies explore the simultaneous centrality and invisibility of women's labor in agricultural production and also highlight the continual dominance of patriarchal family farms in shaping women's access to land, capital, and credit in the global food system (see Sachs 1996; Whatmore 1991, Friedmann 1986, Brandth 2002). Studies of masculinities and

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<sup>4</sup> Gouveia and Juska (2002) point out how production and consumption politics divide along race lines in the food system, particularly in the meat industry, with mobilization around production issues primarily led by Latino groups and consumer resistance largely led by non-Hispanic whites.

<sup>5</sup> As Gouveia and Juska (2002) remind us, these resistance efforts are not only gendered, but also defined by race and ethnicity.

farming also emphasize how gender constructs both men's and women's identities on farms (Brandth 1999). Hassanein (1999) points out that the limitations women face in agricultural environments come not only from overt discrimination or institutional barriers but also from their socialization in rural communities and unequal gender relations experienced in daily life. Women farmers report that they are often not taken seriously or treated respectfully by other farmers, family members, and agricultural professionals (Trauger and Sachs 2006).

## **Domains of Gendered Relations in Food**

Here we examine gender relations in the food system in the material, sociocultural, and corporeal domains. Beginning with the material domain, we trace women's labor from field to table within the agrifood system in the USA. Certainly these issues of gender and food are global, cross-borders, and are not confined to any one country. We focus principally on the USA to set boundaries to our study. The USA is a particularly interesting case in terms of the political economy of the food system since it often wields control in terms of globalization of the food system and has high levels of concentration in production, processing, and retailing.

### ***The material domain: women's paid labor in the agrifood system***

Increasing concentration and globalization of food production, processing, distribution, and retailing characterize the food industry. These changes have shifted the jobs in the food industry, the largest industrial sector in the USA, from production and manufacturing to service. In this section we document how material relations in the agrifood system are highly gendered from field to table.

The dramatic restructuring and concentration of production agriculture has resulted in fewer farms and farmers in the USA. The size of farms has increased at the same time that smaller family farms continue to go out of business. Despite, or maybe because of, these trends, more women are farming today than in the past. The percentage of women farmers doubled from 5 percent in 1978 to 10 percent in 1997 to 12 percent in 2002 (U.S. Census of Agriculture 2002). In addition, the Census of Agriculture began to count multiple operators on farms in 2002 and reported that 27 percent of farmers were women. Women farmers remain underrepresented relative to their proportion in the population, however. In addition, women farmers typically own smaller, less-capitalized farms and have lower farm incomes and farm sales than men farmers (U.S. Census of Agriculture 2002).

While women farmers face difficulty in terms of gaining access to land, capital, credit, and knowledge, women farm laborers are certainly even more disadvantaged. Women farm laborers earn extremely low wages and are often subject to sexual harassment. Among U.S. farm workers, women are more vulnerable to exploitation than men, and they are paid even lower wages and given fewer benefits than their male family members (Kearney and Nagengast 1989). Women farm workers median yearly earnings were between \$2,500 and \$5,000 compared to men farm workers whose median yearly earnings were between \$5,000 and \$7,500 (U.S. Department of Labor 2005).

Gender divisions of labor also characterize food processing and manufacturing. Global commodity chains, especially in horticulture, rely on women as disadvantaged workers in processing and packinghouses (Dolan 2004; Collins

1995; Barndt 1999; Barrientos 2001). Women are preferred workers in vegetable and fruit production, which is seasonal, part-time, and flexible. Increasingly, fresh fruits and vegetables are tended and harvested by women in Southern countries for export to the USA and Europe. In the USA, women are the preferred workers in the lower echelons of food processing, where they tend to dominate low-level, high-intensity jobs, while men dominate supervisor and driver jobs. According to the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2005), women comprised 75 percent of graders and sorters of agricultural products, but only 20 percent of meat processing workers; in both cases their earnings were approximately three-fourths of men's earnings. Indeed, the lowest paying occupation for women in the USA in 1998 was farming, fishing, and forestry occupations with median earnings of only \$302 per week for full-time work (Bowler 1999).

With shifts in diet, farm-export policies, and retail stores demand for prepackaged meat; processors have deskilled jobs and shifted plants from unionized areas to rural areas with cheaper land and labor. The meat industry has changed with changes in diet—the shift from beef consumption to poultry consumption due to health concerns has resulted in poultry processing becoming the largest sector of the meat industry (Kandel 2006). Women, immigrants, and Hispanics have become preferred workers in these low-paying, difficult, and dangerous jobs.<sup>6</sup> These jobs fit the International Labor Organization's definition of 3D jobs: jobs that are dirty, dangerous, and degrading.

In food retailing, globalization has led to dramatic restructuring, with the 10 largest food companies now controlling 49 percent of food sales. Grocery stores ranked among the largest industries in the USA in 2002, providing 2.5 million jobs. Food retailers rely heavily on women workers. In 2002, women worked 49 percent of the hours in grocery stores (Clarke 2003). In their efforts to be competitive, retailers' cost-cutting strategies often translate into low pay for the women workers on whom they rely. For example, 72 percent of sales workers at Wal-Mart are women, who average \$7.50 per hour with no health benefits. At the other end of the spectrum, management in the food retailing industry has been male dominated, so much so that one large grocery chain recently instituted policies to increase the number of women in management.<sup>7</sup>

One of the major shifts in food labor results from increased dining outside the home—in restaurants and other institutions such as schools, hospitals, and prisons. The percent of food expenditures for food eaten outside the home increased from 33 percent in 1970 to 49 percent in 2005 (Economic Research Service 2006). This shift away from domestic food preparation is due in large part to the entry of more women into the labor force and their lack of time to prepare food at home. As more and more people eat out, the number of jobs in food service increases. Women hold most of the jobs in food service. The 2002 U.S. Census reports that women comprise 77 percent of the 6.5 million workers in food preparation and service. Sixty-eight percent of food servers and 78 percent of restaurant greeters are women (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005b). The number of jobs in the food service industry is predicted to increase, but these are not necessarily "good" jobs. Many of these food service

<sup>6</sup> While in 1980, 74 percent of meat processing workers were white, by 2000, 49 percent of meat processing workers were Hispanic (Kandel and Parrado 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Between 2000 and 2005, Safeway increased the number of women store managers by 40 percent, 34 percent for white women and 65 percent for women of color. During the same period of time, the number of women in vice-president positions increased from 12 percent to 25 percent (Catalyst 2006).

workers are entry-level employees who often work long shifts in temporary positions and wield very little power in terms of their schedules or other terms of employment. Many of the jobs held by women in food service are part-time, flexible positions in which the workers earn relatively low wages with few benefits. Part-time work is more common among food and beverage serving workers than among workers in almost any other occupation. In 2004, half of all food servers worked part-time schedules (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005a). Jobs in the food sector are also often "contingent," in that they are conditional, transitory, and irregular.

In the commercial kitchen, we might expect women to outnumber men as cooks. After all, cooking is almost universally coded as women's work in the home. Yet women are less likely than men to work as cooks in restaurants—whether McDonald's or five-star restaurants. Women comprise less than 40 percent of paid cooks and less than 20 percent of head cooks and chefs (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005a). Wages of chefs and cooks vary significantly by type of eating establishment. In 2002, median hourly earnings of chefs and head cooks, jobs that men dominate, were \$13.43 with the highest 10 percent earning more than \$25.86 per hour. By contrast, women cooks often work in institutions and cafeterias earning an average of \$8.72 per hour. Fast-food cooks earned the least—\$6.90 per hour (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005a). Not surprisingly, women in the cooking occupations predominate in places with lower earnings.

Women are not well represented in the leadership of agribusinesses. Even though the number of women-owned businesses in agriculture has almost doubled since 1980, only one business sector (the transportation, communication, and utilities sector), reported fewer women-owned businesses than agriculture. In 1997, women owned only 16 percent of agricultural service businesses, 20 percent of food manufacturing businesses, 21 percent of retail food stores, and 23 percent of retail drinking and eating places (U.S. Census Bureau 1997). In addition, of 11 major U.S. industries, agriculture has historically been the least likely to employ women as managers, executives, or administrators (U.S. Department of Labor 1989). Women employed in these positions made up less than one percent of the total managerial force in the agricultural industry. The food industry, national governments, international trade organizations, and multilateral organizations set policies about food. In 1992, 82 percent of managers in the U.S. Department of Agriculture were male (U.S. Office of Personnel Management 1992), and the percentage was even higher in senior executive positions.

Decisions related to agriculture and food often rely on science and scientific data about agricultural production and food that contain little input from women. Feminist critiques of agricultural science suggest that women's knowledge is often devalued (Feldman and Welch 1995; Sachs 1996). Agricultural and food-related sciences are historically extremely gendered, with men predominating in agricultural science and women finding a place in nutrition or home economics. For example, in 1976, nearly all (99.6 percent) of agricultural scientists were male (Busch and Lacy 1983). While women have historically been excluded from scientific professions in general, their exclusion continues to be particularly glaring in the agricultural sciences. In 1995, women comprised 13 percent of employed agricultural scientists compared to 28 percent of biological scientists (Buttel and Goldberger 2002). However, the underrepresentation of women in the agricultural sciences is shifting, with the percentage of women receiving their Ph.D. degrees in agricultural sciences



increasing substantially in the past ten years from 23 percent in 1995 to 36 percent in 2005 (National Science Foundation 2006).

Women are increasingly performing labor in the formal labor force on farms, processing plants, grocery stores, and restaurants. Much of this work has shifted from labor previously performed by women in the domestic sphere. Women are overrepresented among low-wage food workers, but are underrepresented in the areas of management and science. Food work, earlier performed by middle and upper-middle class women in the home, has been transferred to low-wage workers, often women of color, in the labor force. This imbalance of power between men and women is similarly evident in the domestic sphere. After all, it is in the home and the family—the next domain we discuss—where gender differences in treatment of individuals and access to resources begin (Engberg 1996).

### *The socio-cultural domain: nourishing others*

Although women rarely work as chefs and head cooks in restaurants, they almost always hold the position of head cook in their homes. Regardless of culture, class, or ethnicity, the majority of women cook and serve food for their families—a cultural universal of care and sustenance. Food work involves physical, mental, and caring labor. Women go to the store, shop, unpack groceries, prepare food, cook meals, serve food, wash dishes, and clean the kitchen. Food work is not merely physical but involves relentless mental and caring labor—planning meals, worrying about nutrition, and arranging and serving meals (DeVault 1991). Women must know the food likes and dislikes of their family members, plan the timing and location of meals, and keep up with complicated and ever-changing news on nutrition and food safety. DeVault likens this work of feeding the family to solving a puzzle. DeVault addresses class differences between women, she suggests that in solving the puzzle of what's for dinner, middle-class women consult recipes and working-class women rely on tradition. However, she neglects to consider how race and ethnicity effect women's cooking efforts (Avakain and Haber 2006). Gullah women, African American women, and Jewish women also attempt to maintain their marginalized cultural traditions through food production (Betts 1995; Harris 1995; Kishenblatt-Gimblett 1997).

In solving the food-provision puzzle women typically select food that pleases other family members, especially their husbands (Sutor and Barbour 1975; Burt and Hertzler 1978; Schafer and Bohlen 1977). Furthermore, since men's needs dominate the organization of cooking and eating in terms of the composition and timing of meals, many women face serious repercussions if food is not prepared correctly and on time (Bell and Valentine 1997). Women who fail to please their husband's food preferences often experience negative consequences ranging from small arguments to domestic violence. Indeed, the purchase, preparation, and serving of food often serves as a key instigator of violent incidents in the home (Ellis 1983; Murcott 1983). Thus, although women choose the food from supermarket shelves, their decisions often reflect the preferences of others. And, if they make the "wrong" decision, tension, arguments, or violence may ensue. As with other household work, women experience a fundamental ambivalence between the tedium and marginalizing aspects of their work and the love and caring they feel for their families. Such work can be pleasurable or onerous depending on circumstances such as time or financial pressure.

While women remain responsible for food provision in the home, the nature of this caring work of feeding others has shifted over time. Few families or individuals in households eat all of their meals together. Household members who work, go to school, or spend time outside the home often eat breakfast, lunch, and sometimes dinner away from home in restaurants, cafeterias, or other food establishments. Women who work outside the home have less time to prepare food for their families. Much of food processing and cooking activities for food eaten at home now takes place in the market. Convenience foods, such as pre-cooked meals, save women time preparing meals and bring increased profits to the processing, retailing and restaurant industries. But, convenience foods are expensive, stretching the budgets of low-income women. And as we discussed in the previous section, the labor to produce these convenience foods is often provided by women, often women of color, working for low wages in difficult working conditions (Julier 2006).

Still, despite the increasing entry of women into the labor force, women spend at least twice as much time as men doing domestic chores, an imbalance particularly marked in food labor. Even when men share more domestic labor in the home, they are only marginally involved with food provisioning activities (Engberg 1996). Studies show that mothers, still considered the experts on children, do the majority of work in taking care of children, including feeding them (Zimmerman et al. 2001; Coltrane 1996).

Another aspect of the entry of women into the labor force is that in upper-middle and middle-class U.S households employed women lack the time to do housework and child care. Male household members rarely step in. Women either work almost around the clock or, if they can afford it, hire domestic help. Affluent career women increasingly maintain the illusion of "doing it all" by hiring domestic workers and nannies to clean the house, feed the children, and magically disappear from sight (Ehrenreich and Hothschild 2002). While most women in U.S. households maintain responsibility for cooking and serving food, the dislocation of third-world women to the USA and other industrialized countries enables relatively affluent women to hire immigrant women to perform domestic work while they work outside the home (Mack-Canty 2004). White, upper-middle class women transfer their care work to other women—often poor, immigrants, and women of color (Tronto 2002; Duffy 2005).

### ***The corporeal domain: embodied politics***

While women have primary responsibility for feeding others, they often fail to take care of their own nutritional needs. Many women, regardless of their age or weight are dissatisfied with their bodies (Paquette and Raine 2004). Seventy-five percent of "normal" weight women consider themselves overweight, and 90 percent of women overestimate their body size. The average woman sees 400 to 600 advertisements per day and by the time a girl is 17 years old, she has received over 250,000 commercial messages. Most of these messages directly or indirectly promote physical attractiveness, including being thin. Nearly three-quarters of girls report that magazine models influence their concept of an ideal body shape, yet a woman between the ages of 18 and 34 has only a one percent chance of being as thin as a supermodel. Body discontent leads to dieting by normal weight women, unhealthy weight loss practices, restrained eating, eating disorders, depression, and poor self-esteem (Paquette and Raine 2004).

Within the agrifood system, the diet industry profits enormously from women's obsession with thinness and attempts to maintain unattainable body weights. The numbers of girls and women on diets has skyrocketed. Dieting, now a normal female lifetime preoccupation, begins with girls in pursuit of the perfect body. In a 1986 study of five hundred schoolgirls, 81 percent of ten-year-olds reported they had dieted at least once (Mellin et al. 1992). That the perfect body is, by definition, unattainable, traps many women and girls in a relentless cycle of failure. The proliferation of eating disorders, heavily gendered, is also class specific. Bordo (1998) claims that many women, who can afford to eat well, diet and go hungry most of the time. Girls and women, especially from the upper and upper-middle classes, deny themselves food as they tie their hopes for happiness on being thin.

On the other end of the weight continuum, the number of women who are overweight and obese is increasing. Sixty-two percent of women in the USA are overweight and 28 percent are obese (National Institutes of Health 2006). Gender, class, ethnicity, and race intersect in defining who is likely to be overweight or obese. A negative correlation exists between income and weight; as incomes go down weight goes up. People with low income find foods high in sugar and fat are cheap and readily available, while "healthy" foods are relatively expensive and not necessarily available in their local stores (Morton et al. 2005). Obesity in women is also correlated with race and ethnicity. Obesity is most prevalent among non-Hispanic black women (49 percent) compared with Mexican-American women (38 percent) and non-Hispanic white women (31 percent) (National Center for Health Statistics 2004). For men, however, there is very little difference in obesity levels based on race/ethnicity (National Center for Health Statistics 2004). Obesity is connected to many health problems and the link between obesity and diabetes is particularly high in women. Obesity among children is also on the rise. Mothers often take the blame for their failure to provide their children with nutritious foods. Women with children are caught in a double bind as they are enjoined to make their children happy by feeding them junk food while they are simultaneously exhorted to be "good mothers" by ensuring the nutritional health of their children.

Eating disorders, whether resulting in being too thin or too fat, have been analyzed and treated principally as individual, psychological, and medical problems. Studies of obesity similarly focus the problem on individual eating behaviors rather than the food industry, limited access to nutritious food, or the increasing loss of public space for physical activity. Medicalization and individualization of public health and social problems obscure the food industry's role in constructing people's food desires and behaviors and blame the individual. Since food is women's responsibility, the corollary of the individuation of food-related health problems is that women are to blame.

Women cannot help but be caught up in some form of schizophrenic positioning with regard to food—eat more, eat less; eat well, eat badly—due to the contradictory and simultaneous marketing of thinness and food indulgence. At the same time that fashion advertising tells women to be thin, food advertising advocates indulgence, including eating junk food. Despite, or maybe due to, their schizophrenic position, women are leading efforts to create change in the agrifood system. We highlight some of these efforts in the next section.

## Working against homeostasis

Gender relations in the agrifood system have remained surprisingly static despite sea changes taking place in other dimensions of the agrifood system. One thing that has changed, however, is the extent of women-led initiatives. While women have always been involved in the food system, they now are playing expanded roles in changing material, socio-cultural, and corporeal conditions. Their efforts take multiple forms ranging from individual-level actions to collective resistance in the form of union organizing or involvement in agrifood social movements.

Women have taken the lead in resisting the repressive and exploitative conditions women face as hired labor in the food system. For example, women farm workers have organized for the rights of women farm workers, farm worker health, and day care and schools for migrant children. One group, Organización en California de Lideras Campesinas (Farm worker Women's Leadership Network), organized in 1992, trains and organizes farm worker women on health issues, nutrition, pesticide issues, domestic violence, and economic development. Women have also taken the lead in the retail workers movement, beginning in 2000 when Betty Dukes filed a sex discrimination claim against Wal-Mart, her employer.<sup>8</sup> Wal-Mart is the largest food retailer in the United States as well as one of the largest employers in many regions of the country.<sup>9</sup> The suit charged Wal-Mart with discriminating against women in promotions, pay and job assignments, and that the company was in violation of the Civil Rights Act (Featherstone 2004).<sup>10</sup> Dukes vs. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., eventually expanded to represent 1.6 million women, making it the largest civil rights class-action suit in history. Recognizing the central importance of Wal-Mart policies on American women, National Organization of Women (NOW) actively supports this legal action.

In the public domain, women have worked to reshape the food system through organizing around livelihood issues and claims made on the state. Women were instrumental in establishing and managing federal food assistance programs to combat hunger and poor nutrition, and they continue to lead the fight to hold the line on cutbacks in public programs that provide assistance to impoverished families in the USA. For example, the National Council for Women's Organizations has a food security program that works to protect and expand the Food Stamp Program, the WIC Program (Women, Infants, and Children), and other supplemental food programs.

Women have also played central roles in shaping and furthering alternative agrifood movements and institutions. For example, women have led the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, the California Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, the California Food and Justice Coalition, the USDA Community Food Projects program, and the USDA SARE program. Peter et al. (2000) found that women are better represented and more prominent in sustainable agriculture organizations than they are in conventional agricultural organizations. Women often take the lead in urban agriculture, developing community gardens in diverse, low-income communities (Hynes 1996). For example, women have created Grow

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<sup>8</sup> Specifically, Dukes claimed that despite her hard work and excellent performance, she was denied the training she needed to advance to a higher, salaried position.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Wal-Mart is the largest employer in Pennsylvania.

<sup>10</sup> In February, 2007, a Federal Appeals Court in San Francisco upheld a lower court ruling granting class action status to the lawsuit against Wal-Mart.

Pittsburgh, an organization that works to reclaim abandoned urban lots, build kitchen gardens to improve nutrition, and engage youth in food system work (Grow Pittsburgh 2006).

In Vermont, Maine, Iowa, and Pennsylvania women farmers have formed new types of networks for educational, social, and entrepreneurial support to empower women in sustainable agriculture and food-related businesses (Trauger 2005). For example, the Pennsylvania Agricultural Women's Network began in 2003 as a fledgling organization of women farmers and agricultural professionals with the goals of creating an empowering learning environment and network. The network's rapid growth surprised the organizers. As of 2006, more than 600 members participate in the network, the majority who work as farmers on small or medium-sized operations. Women farmers often lead the way for environmental sustainability and innovative entrepreneurship on farms. For example, in DeLind and Ferguson's (1999) study of community supported agriculture, they discovered that women were the primary workers on CSAs. Other women farmers, frustrated with working so hard to raise crops and livestock with very little return, form non-profits or educational programs on their farms—one woman runs a farm camp for girls and several women involve at-risk children on their farms (Sachs 2006).

Women also lead broad-scale efforts to create, healthy, environmentally sustainable, and socially just food cultures and systems. For example, women are key leaders in pushing for changes in food and agriculture issues in the anti-globalization struggle (Mohanty 2003; Shiva 2002). While some organizing efforts engage the state, most fall into the domain of the consumer politics of food. Women are at the forefront of ethical buying, supporting fair trade, humane, organic, and local food. Some of these efforts are individual acts by consumers and business owners, others are collective actions, and some combine individual and collective actions. For example, Judy Wickes, owner of the White Dog Café in Philadelphia, works with her restaurant and her Fair Food Foundation to strengthen and connect locally owned businesses and farms committed to working in harmony with natural systems, providing meaningful living wage jobs, supporting healthy community life, and contributing to economic justice (White Dog Café 2006). Her efforts are tied more broadly to the fair trade, sustainable agriculture, and local food movements. One of their innovative projects, the Sister Restaurant Project develops "sister" relationships with African-American owned restaurants. They promote visits to their sister restaurants to encourage their customers to visit neighborhoods they otherwise might not go to in order to increase understanding, build citywide community, and support minority businesses and cultural institutions.

In the corporeal realm, women's organizations combat the cultural impositions such as advertising that contribute to the destructive eating behaviors of many women and girls. The concern with eating disorders is the major food-related issue that has been taken up by the feminist movement. For example, the National Organization for Women organizes a "Love Your Body Day" to provide a forum for people to speak out against advertising and images of women that are harmful or offensive. Millman's now classic book, "Such a pretty face: Being fat in America" (1980) explored stereotypes of overweight women and inspired scholarship and activism around issues of body image and feminism.

Despite all of these women-led efforts in the agrifood system, there is a curious absence of feminism per se in women's efforts to create change in the

agrifood system, with the exception of corporeal politics. This is true in three ways. First, while the efforts described above are by women, they are not necessarily consciously "feminist" in the sense of resisting the oppressive nature of gender relations. Second, some of the efforts may be counter to a feminist agenda. Third, the feminist movement rarely takes up issues relating to women and food in material and domestic realms.

Women's efforts to change the food system rarely take an explicitly feminist approach. The leader of the farm women's network studied by Hassanein (1999) emphasized that it was not a "feminist" organization. Luminary women such as Dolores Huerta played strong roles in the farm labor movement. While Huerta was herself a feminist,<sup>11</sup> the farm labor movement, infused with a machismo culture, rarely addresses women's issues. In some cases, women may be instigators, but still play support roles. For example, a study of women in the sustainable agriculture movement in California found that while women were active in the movement, particularly at the grassroots level, men tended to hold the more visible leadership and decision-making positions (Sachs 1996). A Minnesota study found that men acted as teachers, leaders, and decision makers in the sustainable agriculture movement, while women involved in the movement tended to occupy support roles such as providing food, working registration tables, and sending mailings (Meares 1997). Men are disproportionately represented in leadership roles in sustainable agriculture such as project directors, conference speakers, and authors just about everywhere. Women have been correspondingly overrepresented in social cohesion roles such as organizing conferences, coordinating community endeavors, and fostering networks among different groups. The "traditional" roles played by women in these movements may serve to reinscribe and normalize gendered relations.

Beyond this, agrifood women activists have also historically tended to overlook their needs or subordinate themselves. For example, rural women in the USA have tended to join organizations that support their families or farm organizations rather than participating in organizations dedicated to women's empowerment (Sachs 1996). For example, one supporter of the California Women for Agriculture in the 1980s said that the women were involved basically on behalf of their men, from whom they get their ideas (Friedland 1991).

In other ways, some of women's food-system efforts are contradictory—or at least ironic—in terms of a feminist agenda. For example, some practices advocated by alternative agrifood movements, such as farmers' markets and CSAs, can add both to the workload of farm women and to women's already overburdened workload in food procurement and preparation in the home (Allen 1999). Some of the women in Meares' (1997) study of the sustainable agriculture movement reported that their workloads had increased as a result of their partners' participation in the movement, but that the workloads of their male partners had not increased. And, the slow food movement, a shining light of contemporary food movements, promotes the leisurely consumption of elaborate, home-prepared meals without acknowledging that time pressures for the women who are the traditional preparers of food have tightened. On the other hand, a woman resisting domestic servitude in the kitchen might turn to fast

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<sup>11</sup> Huerta worked diligently with Cesar Chavez to organize farmworkers in the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO (UFW) until his death in 1993. At age 75, Huerta continues her work organizing farmworkers as Secretary-Treasurer Emeritus of the UFW and also organizes on feminist issues in her position as a board member of the Feminist Majority Foundation (Dolores Huerta Foundation, 2003-2006).

foods to feed her children and then feel guilty. And, the body-acceptance movement rightly resists cultural stereotypes of thinness for women, but may lead women to accept obesity, a condition that negatively affects their health.

The feminist movement has taken on issues with regard to women and food in the corporeal domain, but has attended far less to the material and socio-cultural domains. Rather, feminist organizing efforts have focused more on women's involvement in the formal economy, formal politics, and concerns with women's bodies and reproductive rights. In the private sphere of the home, the major feminist issue has focused on domestic violence, although rarely is it linked to the apparently crucial trigger of food and meals. Changing the division of labor in the home or kitchen has largely been a struggle for women at the individual level of negotiating with their partners and other family members, as opposed to an organized feminist struggle.

## **Conclusion**

Nearly all women spend a significant portion of their day occupied and preoccupied with food. This responsibility, a key component of women's identity, also serves as a key component of their exploitation, oppression, and, accordingly, their resistance. Women do the majority of food-related work, but have little power. Women feed others and deprive themselves. For Western women and girls, dieting serves as a normal and often lifetime activity. In conditions of food shortage, women and girls go hungry more often than men and boys. Gender discrimination and contingency is enabled by an accepted cultural orientation that undervalues women and their labor. Despite these conditions and their seemingly immutable character, women are taking action to create change. Women's subordination is locked into food, but their resistance in the material, socio-cultural, and corporeal domains of food challenges global capitalism and male privilege. As women work to reshape the food system in the interest of better health, social justice, and environmental soundness, they are also creating possibilities for women to gain control of their bodies and their lives.

We suggest that gender relationships in the food system can be understood through exploring three intersecting and overlapping domains: the material, the socio-cultural, and the corporeal. Feminist scholarship's focus on the connections between gendered divisions of labor in the home and in the labor market and distinctions between the private and public realms prove useful in understanding women's relationship to food. Women's work with food spans the formal economy, informal economy, and household economy. Thus, in studying women's connections to food, we have examined their work in both the formal economy and the household.

Barndt's (1999) Tomasita project is an example of this type of interaction that combines research and action. In the commodity chain tradition, the research traces women's work with tomatoes from the fields and processing plants in Mexico to the supermarkets and fast food restaurants in Canada. This research shows how labor practices of Maquilization and McDonaldization have resulted in the feminization of the workforce as deskilled, part-time, low-wage women workers replaced skilled, permanent, often male, workers. What makes Barndt's project particularly important is the way in which it went beyond research to bring Mexican and Canadian women workers and scholars together to discuss strategies for action and resistance.

Women's experiences in the food system also must be examined through feminist standpoint theory, which holds that feminist social science should be conducted from the standpoint of women in order to examine and understand the systematic oppressions of women in society. Sometimes a source of power, more often one of subordination, the fact remains that we need to understand much more about gender relations in the food system. We need to know much more about who women food activists are, their motivations, and their visions for the food system. We have much to learn about the possibilities for changing gender relations and the emerging field of feminist food studies can lead the way through weaving together feminist studies of food and the body with feminist work in the sociology and political economy of agriculture.



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