



## Commentary

# Cooking, gender, and ultra-processed foods: Toward a public valorization of culinary knowledge

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## Highlights/Key Messages

- Ultra-processed foods drive global rises in obesity and chronic diseases.
- Cooking remains a female burden, highlighting domestic gender inequality.
- Ultra-processed foods' convenience failed to improve gender equality.
- Linked to the care economy, cooking sustains families and public health.
- Policies must value cooking and gender equity to improve global diets.

## Abstract

This commentary reflects on the intersections between gender roles, cooking practices, and the growing consumption of ultra-processed foods within contemporary food systems. The global nutrition transition has been accompanied by the expansion of industrially formulated products and the gradual erosion of everyday culinary practices centered on fresh and minimally processed foods. At the same time, domestic meal preparation remains strongly shaped by gender inequalities, with women performing a disproportionate share of food-related labor within households. The ultra-processed food industry has capitalized on narratives of convenience that promise to reduce the time required for meal preparation, yet these products have neither reduced gender inequalities in household food work nor improved dietary patterns. Situating cooking within the framework of the care economy helps illuminate how food-related labor sustains health and everyday life while often remaining socially undervalued. Drawing on examples from Brazil, such as the National School Feeding Program and solidarity kitchens, this commentary discusses how public policies and community initiatives may contribute to the social valorization of culinary knowledge. Strengthening cooking beyond the strictly domestic sphere may represent an important strategy for promoting healthier diets while advancing gender equity in contemporary society.

## Introduction

In recent decades, many countries have experienced a nutritional transition characterized by shifts from dietary patterns centered on freshly prepared meals based on unprocessed or minimally processed foods to patterns increasingly dominated by industrially formulated products. Evidence indicates that the growing dietary share of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) is displacing long-established food cultures organized around culinary preparation, contributing to deterioration in diet quality and rising rates of diet-related chronic diseases (Popkin 2004; Monteiro et al. 2025).

The NOVA food classification system categorizes foods according to the extent and purpose of industrial processing into four groups: G1. unprocessed or minimally processed foods, G2. processed culinary ingredients, G3. processed foods, and G4. ultra-processed foods. UPFs are industrial formulations made predominantly from substances extracted or derived from foods, often combined with cosmetic additives, and designed to replace foods from the other NOVA groups and their preparation as meals. Examples of ultra-processed foods are frozen lasagnas sold in supermarkets, instant noodles, and filled cookies (Monteiro et al. 2019).

**Keywords:** ultra-processed foods, gender roles, cooking, care economy, public health, food policy

These foods represent an increasingly large percentage of calories consumed by populations. The United States and the United Kingdom are the global leaders in ultra-processed food consumption, accounting for more than half of their daily calories. Other high-income nations, such as Canada and Australia, also show high intakes, with more than 40% of calories. Even countries with lower consumption of ultra-processed foods, mainly due to having a strong food culture, such as Brazil and Colombia, have significant intakes, around 20% (Marino et al. 2021).

As the nutrition transition progressed, an epidemiological transition also occurred, with a growing burden of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and obesity (Popkin 2004). In response, the Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population, in its second edition (published in 2014), includes a golden rule for healthy eating: "Always prefer fresh or minimally processed foods and culinary preparations to ultra-processed foods" (Brazil 2014). This document was pioneering in incorporating the NOVA classification into national dietary guidance and influenced similar approaches in other countries (Jaime and Braga 2025).

One of the central conditions for sustaining dietary patterns based on fresh and minimally processed foods is meal preparation, which includes planning, acquiring food, and transforming ingredients into meals. This process often involves cooking practices and culinary knowledge that give cultural meaning to food. Routinely transforming foods into meals requires a set of skills related to planning, shopping, storage, cooking, and cleaning. Meal preparation is inseparable from healthy eating and essential to the health promotion agenda.

This commentary reflects on the intersections between ultra-processed food consumption, cooking practices, and gender inequalities, and discusses how situating cooking within the framework of the care economy may help inform public policies that value culinary knowledge and support healthier and more equitable food systems.

### Ultra-Processed Foods, Cooking, and Gender Roles

Current data show that the overwhelming presence of women in domestic meal preparation is not a mere impression. According to a global survey by consulting firm Gallup (Gallup and Cookpad 2023), in 2022 women prepared 8.7 meals at home per week, more than double the male average of 4 meals. Although this difference narrowed slightly during the pandemic, it has returned to pre-Covid levels.

When analyzed by country, the data reveal persistent inequalities. Even in countries where the difference is smaller, women still perform a larger share of domestic meal preparation. The balance is fairer in several European countries, whereas in Ethiopia, Tajikistan, Egypt, Nepal, and Yemen women cook over eight meals per week more than men. Across age groups, the pattern also persists, with the largest gap occurring among those aged 35–49 years (Gallup and Cookpad 2023).

This disparity has historical roots. In the book *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici describes how the transition

from feudalism to capitalism in Europe involved the systematic devaluation of work performed by women, including activities carried out within the household (Federici 2004):

*By this time [XVII century], women were losing ground even with respect to jobs that had been their prerogatives, such as ale-brewing and midwifery... The assumption was gaining ground (in the law, in the tax records, in the ordinances of the guilds) that women should not work outside the home, and should engage in "production" only in order to help their husbands. It was even argued that any work that women did at home was "non-work" and was worthless even when done for the market. Thus, if a woman sewed some clothes, it was "domestic work" or "housekeeping," even if the clothes were not for the family, whereas when a man did the same task, it was considered "productive".*

The act of cooking, like other care-related activities, was thus classified as domestic work and devalued. This dynamic remains visible today when comparing domestic cooking with professional culinary labor, in which men frequently occupy positions receiving substantive remuneration and sometimes prestige (Dória 2014).

With the expansion of women's participation in the labor market, domestic responsibilities were not redistributed accordingly, including meal preparation. Instead, women accumulated both paid and unpaid work, reinforcing persistent gender inequalities (Addati et al. 2022). Within this context, the ultra-processed food industry has capitalized on narratives of convenience, promoting products that promise to reduce the time required for domestic meal preparation and cooking. However, technological convenience has not led to any substantial redistribution of domestic responsibilities, but rather contributed to the erosion of culinary practices and to deteriorating dietary patterns.

In the private sphere, real convenience should involve facilitating the preparation and consumption of foods with lower degrees of processing, as advocated by the NOVA classification and the Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population (Brazil 2014). Addressing the growing consumption of ultra-processed foods requires strategies sensitive to social inequalities and to the gendered organization of domestic work (Scrinis et al. 2025). For example, strengthening culinary practices beyond the strictly domestic sphere may be one strategy for promoting adequate and healthy eating.

Despite historical devaluation, culinary knowledge has often been preserved by women, including as a response to exclusion from formal labor markets (DeVault 1991). In Brazilian households in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, control over food storage represented a form of authority within the private sphere (Aguiar 2025). It is curious to note, also, that despite the devaluation of domestic culinary work, the ultra-processed food industry recognizes the value of its result. The food industry continues to mobilize symbolic references to domestic cooking, such as "homemade" claims, to add value to

industrial products (Kanematsu et al. 2020).

Over the years, many women — in Brazil, particularly Black and mixed-race women, who face great discrimination due to their race and gender — found in cooking a pathway to economic survival. Historically, this has included both paid domestic work involving meal preparation in private households and informal food-related activities, such as the preparation and sale of so-called street foods. For many women, these practices have represented important strategies for subsistence and income generation. Recognizing this dimension of culinary labor can help expand its symbolic and, in particular, economic valuation in society, contributing to the social and economic inclusion of women and men engaged in food-related work.

### **Cooking, the Care Economy, and Public Food Policies**

The care economy encompasses the full range of activities and relationships involved in meeting people's daily needs for well-being across the life course (International Labour Organization 2022). Originating in feminist economics and now widely used in international policy frameworks, it includes both paid and unpaid work provided by households, communities, public services, and market actors. Care work comprises direct interpersonal support as well as indirect activities that sustain daily life, such as food preparation, cleaning, and household management. Recognizing care as essential social and economic infrastructure highlights its central role in sustaining health, human development, and the daily practices that sustain families and societies (Addati et al. 2022).

Within this framework, meal preparation and cooking can be understood as forms of indirect care work that sustain everyday life and support adequate and healthy eating. Historically, this labor has been disproportionately performed by women, often without remuneration or social recognition, contributing to persistent gender inequalities. Situating culinary labor within the care economy helps connect the gendered organization of domestic meal preparation with broader policy debates on public investment in care and food systems transformation.

One illustrative example of how culinary labor can be publicly organized and recognized is the Brazilian National School Feeding Program (PNAE). This program is particularly relevant due to its universal character, providing free meals to students enrolled in early childhood education, primary and secondary schooling, and youth and adult education across the country. Implemented in all 5,572 municipalities, PNAE generates substantial employment linked to meal preparation (Hartmann et al. 2025), with more than 340,000 professionals engaged in school meal production in 2024 (INEP 2024). In most municipalities, these workers are directly employed by local governments, although employment arrangements may vary and, in some contexts, include outsourced services. The regulatory structure coordinated by the National Fund for Educational Development and overseen by School Feeding Councils establishes institutional safeguards intended to ensure the provision of freshly prepared meals (Kroth et al. 2020). Beyond expanding labor market opportunities, particularly

for women, these positions contribute to the public recognition of culinary knowledge as an essential component of care provision and education (Schwendler et al. 2024).

In addition, PNAE mandates that at least 30% of federal funds allocated for school meal procurement be used to purchase foods directly from local and regional family farming producers, while its nutritional guidelines prioritize freshly prepared meals and limit the routine use of ultra-processed products (Canella et al. 2022). Procurement guidelines prioritize products originating from organic and agroecological production systems whenever available (Kroth et al. 2020). Many participating suppliers are women engaged in agroecological farming practices who extend knowledge historically exercised within household food provision into institutional settings (Schwendler et al. 2024). Their participation strengthens local food systems, diversifies school menus based on minimally processed foods, and illustrates how public food policies can simultaneously support rural livelihoods, gender equity, and the social valorization of care-related work (Scrinis et al. 2025).

Another illustrative example is the network of solidarity kitchens created by social movements. In Brazil, more than two thousand public spaces currently prepare and distribute free meals to populations experiencing socioeconomic vulnerability. Many of these initiatives originated within the Homeless Workers' Movement, where collective meal preparation initially supported community organization during housing occupations and later expanded, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, as an emergency strategy for food provision in contexts of weakened social protection (De Sordi 2023).

These kitchens typically operate through combinations of donated food supplies from community members, civil society organizations, and local partner organizations, while meal preparation is largely carried out by volunteers and movement participants, and in some cases supported by stipends or project-based funding (De Sordi 2023). Their functioning demonstrates how community food initiatives can act as collective care infrastructures, redistributing responsibility for food provision beyond individual households while simultaneously valuing the culinary knowledge historically associated with unpaid domestic labor.

In Brazil, the National Care Policy was established in 2024 through Federal Law No. 15.069/2024 (Brazil 2024a). This regulation recognizes care as a right and as a shared social responsibility among the State, families, the private sector, and civil society, seeking to articulate public policies across health, social assistance, labor, education, and human rights. Its implementation is being organized through the "Brasil que Cuida" National Care Plan, which includes intersectoral initiatives aimed at expanding access to care services, strengthening the training and working conditions of care workers, and supporting infrastructure that sustains everyday life, including community food provision (Brazil 2024b). Although still in early stages of consolidation, this policy represents an important step toward expanding food and nutrition actions that publicly value cooking and foster

a more collective and socially supported ethic of care (Pires et al. 2025).

## Conclusions

The consumption of ultra-processed foods remains highly prevalent in many countries and is associated with an increased risk of diet-related chronic diseases. Dietary guidelines that prioritize fresh and minimally processed foods in response to this depend, in practice, on the preservation and strengthening of culinary practices. Cooking, however, has historically been constructed as women's responsibility and allocated low status.

Recognizing cooking as essential for population health requires reframing it as a form of care work that should not rest disproportionately on women. Strengthening culinary knowledge beyond the domestic sphere — through public policies, institutional food provision, and community initiatives — can contribute both to reducing reliance on ultra-processed foods and to redistributing responsibilities for food preparation.

In Brazil, programs such as the National School Feeding Program and solidarity kitchens illustrate how culinary labor can be publicly recognized and socially supported, while recent advances such as the National Care Policy create new opportunities to integrate food provision into broader strategies for gender equity and social well-being. Advancing this agenda requires sustained investment, institutional coordination, and continued dialogue on collective responsibility for cooking as a public good.

Advancing this debate depends on the active participation of both women and men, including in academic production, which is reflected in the shared authorship of

this article. Furthermore, cooking is not only a domestic activity, but a social practice embedded in systems of care. Recognizing the value of meal preparation and culinary knowledge requires policies that redistribute responsibilities for food provision while strengthening food cultures based on minimally processed foods.

## Author Contributions

PCJ: Conceptualization, literature search, methodology, supervision, review and editing. MBLB: Literature search, methodology, writing first draft. All authors gave approval of the final version and consent for its publication.

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