

# Gender, Care and Food Practices: A critical reflection on traditional roles between activism and resilience

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## Abstract

*In times of increasing insecurity, women often emerge as key figures in coping with crises through contexts of care. This article aims to critically reflect on how food and specific forms of food activism, such as Ollas Comunes, allow for a rethinking and re-evaluation of traditional gender roles related to food. These roles, which are deeply embedded in social and cultural narratives, constitute the foundation of shared social representations. Historically, women's participation has been constrained to the private and domestic spheres, with a focus on matters related to household management and food preparation. Nevertheless, women's social movements of care that focus on environmental, food, and basic needs issues are gaining prominence and creating spaces for activism and resistance. The literature indicates that women's groups, frequently emerging from pre-existing informal networks, serve as vital resources during emergencies, providing a crucial service that is implicitly included in reconstruction policies. Their proactive involvement is based on a broad and deep knowledge of everyday realities and responds to the specific needs of the target community. These women-generated spaces, in which food serves as a central symbol and resource, allow women to respond to immediate needs, share ideas and knowledge, and promote community resilience. Despite significant challenges, including those related to legitimacy and social integration, these movements continue to develop and organise, becoming essential vehicles for social support and community resilience. This critical analysis demonstrates how food, through women's activism, can serve as a potent instrument for empowerment for these social actors who are acknowledged in the public sphere. The innovative actions undertaken by these groups address not only basic needs but also promote the creation of material and social structures capable of redefining women's gender roles in care and society. This, in turn, makes them more powerful and influential.*

**Keywords:** food activism; gender roles; community resilience; women's movements; empowerment

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## Introduction

The intersection of gender, care, and food practices is a field of study of critical importance in the contemporary socio-cultural context, particularly in light of growing concerns about environmental sustainability and social justice.

Those who identify as female often assume a central role in care activities, both within family dynamics and in the broader social sphere. Concurrently, they are profoundly engaged in the production, distribution, and consumption of food at the private, intimate, and familial levels, within the home, as well as in the public sphere. This intricate nexus necessitates a comprehensive critical analysis to fully comprehend the dynamics of power, resistance, and social transformation at play. Historically, women's roles have often been confined to the private, domestic sphere, with a focus on household management and food preparation. In recent years, however, women-centred social movements focused on care, the environment, food, and meeting basic needs have gained prominence, opening up new spaces for activism and resistance and shedding new light on gender roles. Empirical studies and research demonstrate that women's groups, frequently constituted through pre-existing informal networks, emerge as pivotal resources in crisis and emergency situations, providing indispensable support that is tacitly integrated into reconstruction strategies and often unacknowledged. Their active participation is based on detailed and in-depth knowledge of daily life, which enables them to respond effectively to specific community needs. A key and necessary movement to address in this reflection is ecofeminism, which links struggles against women's oppression with those against environmental exploitation. In addition, the ethics of care, as described by psychologist Carol Gilligan, provides a theoretical framework for understanding the fundamental role of caring practices in social functioning and for identifying strategies for enhancing these practices to promote social change. Gilligan proposes ethics based on relationships and mutual responsibility, in contrast to the ethics of justice traditionally associated with male roles (Gilligan, 1982). These two concepts provide a valuable analytical framework through which to examine the ways in which caring practices, including food preparation, can be perceived not only as domestic tasks but also as acts of resistance and empowerment. These specific contexts, in which food serves as a central symbol and resource, operate according to distinct logic from those of collective initiatives. When activated, they initiate a process of individual and

community engagement based on alternative principles, which in turn generates new forms of collective participation and interaction.

The objective of this critical reflection is to examine and analyse in depth the intricate web of relationships between women and food. It will focus on the tensions that exist between the roles traditionally assigned to women in the food context and the potential transformations that can emerge when such practices become the object of activism for community resilience.

The reflections presented in this article are based on a critical review of secondary literature on the topic of ecofeminism and food activism practices, as well as selected case studies that support the argumentation. The case studies selected for analysis represent women's initiatives situated within socio-economic contexts that are characterised by vulnerability. Specific focus was placed on movements that utilise food as a vehicle for resistance and solidarity. The selection criteria were based on the relevance of the cases to issues of ecofeminism and the ethics of care, the impact of the initiatives on community resilience and women's participation, and the availability of sources detailing the socio-cultural context and effects of these initiatives. A total of five case studies were examined, encompassing different geographical contexts. These included Ollas Comunes in Latin America, particularly in the contexts of Chile and Peru (**Fort & Alcázar, 2023; Catacora Salas & Gutiérrez Suárez, 2023; Hiner et al., 2022; Salas-Herrera et al., 2021**) and other forms of urban and rural food activism (**Calcagni, 2023**). The presented cases illustrate the ways in which women use food not only to meet immediate nutritional needs but also as a vehicle for political engagement and social transformation. This article will begin by drawing on the concepts of ecofeminism and the ethics of care to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the intersections between gender, care, and the environment. Subsequently, I will reflect on food as a specific expression of gendered care, emphasizing how food practices are shaped by women's traditional role narratives. Finally, I will analyse women's food-based activist movements, demonstrating how these initiatives alter gender dynamics and foster community resilience. The objective of this study is to demonstrate how food and its associated practices are not merely taken for granted aspects of daily life, but that through women's activism, they can be transformed into powerful tools of empowerment for communities.

## **Ecofeminism and Ethics of Care: A conceptual analysis**

The conceptual and political movement of eco-feminism, which emerged in the 1970s, represents a theoretical approach that emphasises the inherent connection between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of nature. This relationship has its roots in millennia-old history, as evidenced by the works of Barad (2017), Pandey (2017), and Millner (2021). The term 'eco-feminism' was first coined by the French philosopher Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 in her treatise *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*. This movement aims to challenge the patriarchal paradigm of domination by promoting an ideology that is interconnected with and supportive of the natural world (Adams, 2023; Glazebrook, 2023; Herles, 2023; Mediavilla, et al., 2023). At its core, eco-feminism posits that power structures and gender inequalities are inextricably linked with the exploitation of environmental resources. The conceptual foundations of eco-feminism can be found in indigenous traditions and local community resistance movements, which have consistently advocated a relationship of mutual respect and care for the natural environment. Ecofeminism, which emerged as a response to the need to establish a connection between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature, in fact, does not refer to women in the general sense but rather focuses on specific groups of women, predominantly marginalised or belonging to particular geographical and cultural contexts. For instance, indigenous and rural women are often the primary subjects of this discourse, given that their livelihood practices are inextricably linked to the natural environment and the stewardship of local resources. Indeed, in many societies, these women assume the role of guardians of biodiversity, preserving agricultural traditions that are based on sustainable management of natural resources. The close link between women and nature is undoubtedly shaped by living conditions and livelihoods. Therefore, ecofeminism acknowledges the existence of diverse experiences among women, which are influenced by social, economic and geographical contexts. To illustrate, in rural areas of the Global South, women are frequently the primary food producers and custodians of local and ancestral knowledge pertaining to agriculture and natural resource management. Conversely, in urban contexts, they may engage in the promotion of sustainable food systems through community initiatives (Assan, 2014; Glazebrook et al., 2020). This plurality of experiences demonstrates that ecofeminism is not a unified movement but rather a network of disparate voices and practices unified by a common struggle against the oppression and exploitation of natural resources. Nevertheless, it is only in recent decades that this approach has been theoretically formalised in the context of feminist activism. Eco-feminism critiques the prevailing model of development and progress, which is

based on the unlimited depletion of natural resources and the commercialisation of the natural world. Instead, it promotes a vision that is focused on care, sustainability, and the interconnectedness of all living things.

In this context, the concept of the ethics of care, as developed by psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982, 2011), is useful for reflection, offering an alternative to the traditional male code of ethics that emphasizes the importance of care, interdependence, and attention to the particular situation. In her seminal 1982 text, *A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Gilligan posits that women develop an ethical sensibility characterized by care and responsibility that differs from the traditional male ethical approach based on principles of autonomy, rationality, and impartiality. Gilligan (1982) posits that women tend to evaluate moral issues on the basis of relationships and empathy rather than abstract rules or self-interest. This ethical perspective on care is of significance in the analysis of gender dynamics and feeding practices. It highlights the prominent role of women in providing care, both in the private context of family dynamics and in broader societal contexts. In the domestic context, women frequently assume primary responsibility for food preparation, family nutrition, and the management of food resources. This role is not limited to the private sphere; rather, it extends to the public sphere, where women are often involved in caring activities within communities, voluntary organizations, and other social institutions. Furthermore, the ethics of care underscores interdependence and the significance of grasping specific social circumstances and contexts, thereby offering a valuable conceptual framework for comprehending the intricacies of relationships between food practices, gender, and the natural environment.

The following section presents a comprehensive examination of the role of food as an expression of both eco-feminism and the ethics of care. This section will examine how food practices exemplify the tenets of mutual respect and environmental stewardship espoused by eco-feminism and how they reflect the focus on relationships and social responsibility emphasised by the ethics of care. This conceptual connection will demonstrate how food practices are influenced by gendered values, ideologies, and power dynamics.

### **The Role of Food in the Articulation of Ecofeminism and the Ethics of Care**

Food is not merely a source of nourishment; it also plays a pivotal role in the ethics of care and eco-feminism, influencing numerous aspects of human life. Indeed, the preparation and sharing of meals extend beyond

the mere satisfaction of physical needs, representing acts that are intrinsically linked to care, respect for the environment, and the building of social relationships, particularly in communities where the kitchen is considered the heart of the home. These occasions present opportunities for individuals to come together, share experiences, and reinforce familial and social bonds. In addition to its role in social interaction, food plays an important role in human emotionality and psychology. Meals not only satisfy the palate but also contribute to a sense of identity and belonging through the transmission of culinary traditions and food-related rituals. In this context, the act of caring is manifested through the preparation of nourishing and appetizing food that benefits both the body and the mind. The act of preparation, sharing, and food choice demonstrates a commitment to self-care, care for others, and environmental stewardship. This commitment to caring for oneself, others, and the environment fosters an interconnected vision of solidarity with the larger world around us.

From the perspective of eco-feminism and environmental sustainability, food choices assume a broader meaning. Food practices reflect a personal and collective ecological footprint, with a focus on responsibility to the environment and future generations. This becomes particularly relevant in the context of the current climate crisis and environmental degradation, where food choices have a significant impact on the health of the planet. Women play an important role in promoting sustainable and environmentally sound food choices (**Britton & Price, 2014; Cooley, 2015; Halloran, 2015; Sachs & Patel-Campillo, 2014; Williams-Forson & Cognard-Black, 2014; Allen & Sacks, 2012; Mares, 2012**). In addition to their role as guardians of traditional knowledge related to food cultivation and preparation, women are also custodians of local food traditions. The transmission of this knowledge and the practice of biodiversity-friendly agricultural practices demonstrate that women are deeply concerned with environmental issues. It is not uncommon for women to be the primary agents of conservation efforts related to local crops and biodiversity. Furthermore, their active involvement extends to supporting local producers and promoting sustainable agri-food supply chains. This tangible commitment translates into the development of more sustainable food systems and improved agricultural practices that respect both the surrounding ecosystem and local communities.

It is important to note, however, that this work is largely invisible, essentialised, and devalued. It is often considered a natural task that is not worthy of social or economic recognition. The societal expectations placed upon women in relation to food and care work are oppressive and limiting. The pervasiveness of cultural norms and patriarchal structures perpetuates the idea that these tasks are the exclusive domain of women,

thereby relegating them to subordinate roles within the domestic sphere. This distorted view of women's food work is not only unjust but also harmful, contributing to the perpetuation of gender inequalities and limiting women's potential for empowerment within communities. In this sense, feminist food studies is an interdisciplinary field that examines the intersections of food, gender, and other socio-cultural factors. This critical approach examines the ways in which gender issues impact the entirety of the food chain, encompassing both production and consumption, as well as their reciprocal influences. In addition, the concept of food citizenship underscores the entitlement and obligation of citizens to engage actively in all phases of the food system. This entails promoting equitable access to food, participation in decision-making, and environmental sustainability.

### **Women's Food Activism: Case studies and emerging challenges**

The concept of activism is understood here as playing a central role in promoting sustainable food practices and advancing gender equity. Activist organisations and movements considered here are committed to responding quickly to concrete emergencies and promoting equitable access to food resources by advocating ethical, affordable and sustainable forms of food production and consumption (**Borghoff & Teixeira, 2021; Graf, 2022; Mitra, 2021**). Moreover, activism facilitates the re-appropriation of traditional food practices and improves the knowledge and skills of local communities. To gain a deeper understanding of the interconnection between gender, care and food practices, it is essential to examine case studies and exemplary practices. For example, in many rural communities in the global South, women are the main actors in food production and ecosystem management (**Fort & Alcázar, 2023; Hiner et al., 2022**).

A review of case studies, such as Ollas Comunes and Comedores Populares, reveals community initiatives that address challenges related to food access and provision in situations of vulnerability and need (**Moon, 2022; Fort & Alcázar, 2023; Catacora et al., 2023**). Ollas Comunes are community initiatives that are widespread in many countries, particularly in Latin America. They consist of the rapid creation of community kitchens where people come together to prepare and share meals. Often led by women's groups or grassroots organisations, these initiatives are designed to ensure access to nutritionally sound meals for all, particularly those who are economically or socially disadvantaged. Ollas Comunes play a key role in the fight against hunger and food insecurity by providing crucial support to people who would otherwise not have access to nutritious food. These initiatives often arise in response to a variety of crises, including



environmental disasters, armed conflicts and famine. Moreover, these community kitchens play a symbolic role, functioning as spaces of encounter and solidarity where individuals can share experiences, resources and mutual support, thus contributing to the building of social networks and individual and community resilience.

One particularly noteworthy case study is that of the Ollas Comunes in Peru, which has been described in detail by Fort and Alcázar (2023). This study examines the emergence of Ollas Comunes in the most vulnerable areas of Lima during the pandemic, with a particular focus on the central role of women in this process. These women were not only responsible for the procurement and distribution of food but also for providing care in an environment characterised by extreme scarcity. The period under examination in this study is from the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 to the beginning of 2021. The women involved in these initiatives contributed significantly with their resources: the provision and generation of space, the loan of equipment, and the dedication of time. They have also generated new spaces of empowerment and solidarity in these places. Despite the lack of initial support from public policy, this informal organisation has, over time, become a significant social force and reference point for the community, both in terms of food security and as a symbol of resilience after the crisis.

Another significant case study is the research conducted by Catacora Salas and Gutiérrez Suárez (2023) on Ollas Comunes in the southern region of Lima. This ethnographic study was conducted between September 2021 and January 2022 and focused on residents of La Nueva Rinconada, a highly precarious area within the Pamplona Alta district. The study shows how, again, it was women who took a central role in organising the Ollas Comunes, which proved to be an effective means of addressing food insecurity exacerbated by the advent of the pandemic. As one of the participants explained,

*So what are we going to eat? ' And at that moment, all the carts came to help all those who had communal pots and pans while we had none. And from there we ran upstairs, we ran downstairs, to get the food, and we never got it because they said 'they have to have their pot to give the food. If you don't have it, you don't have it.' So we decided to prepare our own pot, all of us, so that we could give our life. And so, in this way, we started cooking, and from this date on, we continued, we never stopped. (Salas & Suárez, 2023: 7)*

This statement exemplifies how these women understood social dynamics and consequently quickly mobilised to form their Olla Común, to secure vital food donations and provide for their families and neighbours. The case study demonstrates how the broad and distinctive social and cultural



knowledge typical of women, much of it also rooted in Andean traditions and memories, was mobilized in an urban context with the goal of ensuring food security and collective well-being in a context of extreme vulnerability.

Also in Chile, Ollas Comunes have emerged in both Valparaíso and the Ñuble and Bío-Bío regions. In Valparaíso, women have played a crucial role in organizing food solidarity networks, continuing a long tradition of feminist and community organizing. As one participant explained,

*Although there are some men, the majority of the Ollas Comunes are women. The men are the organizers, but the women are the ones who do everything... I think women are always supportive, more than anything else, because you always help those around you. (...) We organized a communal pot, where we worked with other women. We prepared portions of food that came from donations from the Church and some NGOs at the time. We had a vegetable garden, where we had shifts every 15 days or something like that to go and find ... ingredients, potatoes, squash, chard, what was planted, and cook... Then, at some point, a literacy workshop was also born, which was my first teaching experience. (Hiner et al., 2022: 715)*

As the quote makes clear, women are the engine of action in these contexts and starting from an emergency, in this case food emergency, they are then able to expand the power of action by transcending the merely nutritional task, evidenced by the birth of a literacy workshop. This historical memory of resistance helped to quickly reactivate the community during the pandemic (Hiner et al., 2022) while promoting a sense of belonging and collective identity through shared food practices (Salas-Herrera et al., 2021).

Finally, also in Chile, the ANAMURI (Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Rurales e Indígenas) movement offers another example of how women, particularly indigenous and peasant women, have used food practices as a form of resistance (Calcagni, 2023). Founded in 1998, ANAMURI has deep roots in the women's and peasant movement that opposes neoliberal policies that threaten food sovereignty and access to natural resources such as land and water. The women of ANAMURI, from rural and indigenous communities such as the Mapuche, Aymara and Diaguita, are committed to the conservation of peasant seeds, which are considered a key resource for maintaining agricultural self-sufficiency and biodiversity, as well as valuable sources of memories and traditions. This quote sums up their perception of the role they are playing in challenging the dominant food system,

*We are the peasant, rural and indigenous women who feed the world with healthy and clean peasant production systems, who struggle every day against agro-industrial food systems that manage monocultures and industrial animal production with perverse systems of production and animal mistreatment (Calcagni, 2023: 174)*

The care work of these women is not limited to the domestic sphere but involves community management of resources, struggle for land rights, and active participation in agroecology and food sovereignty initiatives. This movement has also enabled women to become active agents in shaping new agricultural and environmental policies, as evidenced by their participation in Chile's constitution-making process in 2021.

However, these initiatives often face considerable obstacles, including social legitimacy, integration into the larger social framework, resource management, and cultural discrepancies that can affect the effectiveness and success of their efforts (Calcagni, 2023; Molony, 2022). Nevertheless, there are indications of resistance. Activism related to food practices is of particular importance to women, as it offers them the opportunity to transform their daily experience of care into meaningful political action and to do so through the creation of a new and powerful public space. Ollas Comunes and other forms of food activism are thus real places of encounter and activism that challenge the usual operational logic of public space. In these community kitchens, women discuss, organize, and act collectively, demonstrating their capacities in the public sphere in a way that transcends the traditional caring role assigned by society. In these innovative spaces, women demonstrate a new approach to action and practice by generating communities that are more inclusive, resilient, and attentive to the differences and needs of all. In contrast to conventional operational logics of public space, which often exclude or marginalize women, these initiatives propose a new model of participation and empowerment based on recognition, sharing, solidarity and collective action. In this context, food is the third element that becomes a flywheel of resistance and solidarity, a tool for nourishing the community and building a sense of belonging and solidarity within it (Moon, 2022; Stovall et al., 2015; Swan & Psarikidou, 2024). A deep and conscious reading of the social power of these spaces of action within the public sphere and the full recognition of their transformative potential would make it possible to reaffirm the role of women as true agents of community change and to be able to actively include them in decision-making processes and in the construction of public policies that are more sensitive to collective needs.

## Conclusions

The main intent of the reflection was to propose a redefinition of the role of food in contemporary society in parallel with a critical rethinking of traditional constructions of gender narratives. Thinking of food as trivial or taken-for-granted every day or domestic and private matter represents a restrictive perspective. Food turns out to be a political and social battleground in which gender and power dynamics are inextricably intertwined. Food practices not only reflect the gender inequalities present in our society but can also be used as tools of resistance and social transformation.

The analysis of the cases presented demonstrates how the concept of empowerment for women goes beyond simply improving material conditions and resolving the emergency in a short time. For women, empowerment translates into the acquisition of organisational skills, the ability to negotiate resources with local authorities and aid providers, and, most importantly, the reconfiguration of their role within the community. Initiatives such as Ollas Comunes transform local contexts, generating real networks of solidarity that strengthen social cohesion. At the individual and collective level, empowerment manifests itself in the fact that women are able to address an experience of economic and social vulnerability by then further transforming it into an opportunity to strengthen the community fabric and promote greater social equity. The personal interest women show in these actions and contexts takes the form of a desire to improve their own living conditions and those of their neighbours in their entire community through actions that combine everyday pragmatism with political resilience. These aspects have a lasting impact on the community: women, initially motivated solely by the need to provide food security for their families, become figureheads and political leaders in their communities, showing a strong shift in focus of action toward the collective interest. The empowerment gained and exercised, therefore, is also not limited to the individual but expands, contributing to the support of community resilience and the ability to cope with future challenges. They also initiate a real process of identity production (on a personal and collective level), which acts as a strategy for gaining visibility and political centrality as well as fostering a reflection on the positions of subaltern groups that invoke and construct an essence to achieve political, economic and/or social goals. Through these acts of care and resistance, women demonstrate how food practices can act as powerful tools of social transformation, capable of generating profound changes in both gender relations and existing power structures.

It is therefore of utmost importance to take a more expansive, critical and intersectional approach to food: rather than being viewed as mere domestic tasks assigned to a specific gender, food practices represent a crucial arena in which individuals can express their agency and power in social space. By engaging in activism around food, women can transform their personal and private experiences into a meaningful form of social action. By broadening perspective and seeking to move beyond binary logic, contributions from people of all genders in this field are valuable, as they can facilitate significant changes in our understanding of social problems and our strategies for addressing them. Ultimately, it is only through a collective effort to recognize and amplify the voices and experiences of all people that we can hope to build a more equitable and sustainable future for all.

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**Endnotes**

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