

Beyond Just Adding Women: Towards Gender Transformative Food Systems

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Gendered norms are deeply-rooted in cultural practices, and shape the experiences of urban food systems actors in different ways, in different local contexts. Guided by a Feminist Political Ecology framework and by Gender Transformative Approaches, this article discusses how urban spaces and notions of food are “embodied” and why this calls for more political and nuanced approaches to inclusive urban food systems.

Our relationship with food is shaped by political, social, ecological, and economic change processes and institutions at scale. In the preface of the book, *Women Feeding Cities*, Hovorka et. al. (2009; xiii) write that, ‘urban agriculture is embedded in a wide range of complex social, economic... and ecological processes in and around the city to which individuals and households have to adjust... with important gender-related implications’. These intersections between food systems, gender and urban spaces are not simple and linear. Rather they are “porous” at multiple sites and “embodied”.

Simply put, “embodied” means that the everyday lived experience within (in this case) urban spaces and our relationships with food are entangled in the social attributes associated with genders. For example, there are distinctly gendered norms around the spaces occupied by men and women; men tend to be associated with the public domain and separated from the domestic, private spheres associated with women. While both women and men engage in food production activities, these activities are gendered not just in relation to production, but across entire value chains. For example, the domestic ‘feminine’ spaces inside households – notably the kitchen – are almost synonymous with where women’s bodies are situated, and not always by choice – even though, as Van Esterik (1999 p.160) notes, the task of preparing food can be ‘simultaneously, a source of pleasure and a burden’. In sum, urban spaces are unequal in multiple,

plural ways for different individuals. It is vital to pay attention to these gendered markings, behaviours, practices and perceptions when we talk about gender in relation to urban food systems.

Feminist Political Ecology

Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) deviates from simplistic framings of gender inequality as distinct and static differences between women and men, even though it does acknowledge that being male or female is a critical variable in shaping access, use and control of natural resources, and in the experience of processes of ecological change. Firstly, FPE analyses show that the intersect of differences by gender crosscut by other social disparities (such as class, caste, race, culture, religion, ethnicity, age and disability) shapes inequality in different contexts and spaces. As such, gender inequality is never pure. Secondly, while the dynamics of inequality will differ depending on social, political, economic and ecological context, intersectional inequalities by gender persist well beyond the household and local levels. That means gender inequality is never absent. Finally, inequalities are never static, they are dynamic, evolving at scale and across contexts. In sum, there is no one universal experience of gender inequality; and addressing complex, entrenched and contextually different inequalities requires tackling the root causes of systemic inequalities in societies and economies at different scales.

To understand gender and food systems in urban spaces, we need first to understand that urban green spaces have multiple meanings and values for those who experience vulnerability and marginality at the intersections of multiple disparities. In January 2020, the International Water Management Institute’s Ethiopia office, part of the UK Research and Innovation Global Challenges Research Fund-supported project, ‘Water Security and Sustainable Development Hub’, facilitated a visit to an urban agriculture project in Gulele on the fringes of Addis in Ethiopia. Here, we met a community of elderly, marginalised women caring for their HIV-infected and orphaned young grandchildren, who spoke of the different meanings of an urban garden space. It is here, away from congested living quarters, that they

experience an open place under the sun, feel the breeze and hear the birds. It is here that they connect socially and emotionally with others. Yes, the food they grow is also very important, even if it is not enough to meet hunger and nutritional needs. In an urban agriculture project, what the practitioner sees and feels is far more complex than what an urban agriculture project is assumed to provide.

Further, as Hovorka (2005, p. 137) acknowledged, ‘opportunities and constraints... in creating, shaping and sustaining agricultural systems... vary for different groups of urban dwellers Who you are, where your plot is located and how you interact with the environment’ is a deeply embodied experience. The interplay of power, politics and privilege play out across the entire urban food system and through value chains, well beyond spaces of production. We know well that increasing production contributes to addressing food insecurity but it rarely resolves the problem in its entirety. Amongst other things, gender norms, identities and intersectional inequalities shape systems of food production, distribution and consumption, as well as the agency to demand, question and hold accountable food system policies and processes.

Gender Transformative Approaches

A gender transformative approach (GTA) goes beyond the mere representation of women, to call for acting upon the dynamics of gender-power interrelations at scale. As McDougall et al (2020) explain, ‘GTAs seek to constructively, and in a context-driven way, *transform* the structural barriers that underpin gender equality by going deeper than just addressing the “symptoms” of gender inequalities to tackle instead the “root causes” that shape unequal power relations and structures’. Figure 1 depicts how a GTA requires acting on multiple issues and at multiple levels.



Figure 1: GTA at multiple levels. Source: Hillenbrand et. al, 2015.

Ways forward for transforming gendered inequalities in urban food systems

Some key steps can be taken towards reversing the stereotyping of gender in processes of food production, distribution and consumption.

1) Reflecting on what needs to change and why

Gender-food inequalities are shaped by socio-cultural norms and expectations, as well as by issues of power, politics and disparities at scale. Thus, sex-disaggregated data and statistics will only tell us part of what we need to know and address. Similarly, integrating women in food systems – in production and beyond – might open new opportunities for (some) women but not necessarily in ways that challenge and reverse embodied experiences of urban spaces and food. We therefore caution against popular claims of women as “feeders” of cities, of eulogising women’s supposedly inherent knowledge, ability and interests, and especially women’s care work in the kitchen and at home. We suggest focusing on identifying the challenges to, and opportunities for, those who experience food insecurity at the intersection of complex contextual inequalities, as well as understanding the structural barriers to their meaningful inclusion in urban food systems. The matrix in Figure 1 provides a framework for analysing what needs to change, which varies in different social, economic and spatial contexts.

2) Recognising and valuing relational meanings and experiences of space and food

Our everyday experiences and practice of food and place are shaped through the intersection of social identities and local contexts. Inclusive and gender transformative urban food systems require ensuring that those “furthest left behind” in urban spaces can meaningfully engage in and inform urban food initiatives. This requires understanding, acknowledging and ensuring that plural experiences, meanings and values of both food and place inform the material and technical dimensions and objectives of food security.

In our visit to Gulele, we found that the elderly women want to grow *good, nutritious* food, rather than *more* food, even though they experience significant food insecurity. Here, the act of growing food for the health and wellbeing of their unwell, HIV-infected grandchildren, and the act of being able to share food with similarly vulnerable neighbours, mattered far more than producing a surplus to sell for an income. This exemplifies the dimensions of embodied pleasures associated with food. Similarly Cidro et al (2015) recount that for urban indigenous communities in Canada having access to more food increased, rather than decreased, food-related anxiety. Rapid changes in their food habits meant they had reduced intake of healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food, and lacked food sovereignty due to an overreliance on external actors, systems and processes.

These examples remind us that our relationships with food are complex, plural and multi-layered. They remind us that food systems cannot be simplistically and solely reduced to mere economic or utility-based values and framings. Put together, food and space have implications on belonging, social cohesion, emotions and identity – and gender is a critical variable in these porous intersections.



Field visit to an urban agriculture project in Gulele.

Photo by Deepa Joshi



Discussions with farmers in Gulele.

Photo by Deepa Joshi

3) Avoiding prescriptive gender tool-kits

There is no simple magic bullet to “doing” gender transformative urban agriculture and food systems. A key underlying premise of FPE and GTA thinking is that we cannot wish away the complexities of gender in urban food initiatives by essentialising women as special agents of development. Feminist researchers are deeply wary of prescriptive, technical gender tool-kits, not only because these tend to disallow capturing complex, dynamic realities, but also because they often lose meaning and political edge when they begin to be applied mechanically and generically across diverse economic, social, political and ecological (urban) contexts. Feminist approaches also emphasise that how we see, respond and react is deeply subjective. As researchers and practitioners, we bring our values and ideals to the work we do. In other words, our positionality influences how we interpret and apply tools and methods.

Taking all of the above into account, we suggest some ways forward. The bullet points below constitute broad guiding principles, built on our analyses of key gaps in current approaches to mainstreaming gender in urban agriculture:

- Distinguish between urban food production vis-à-vis urban food systems and trace intersectional inequalities by gender across urban food value chains.
- Collate sex-disaggregated data where it helps provide evidence for change, but also critically examine how gender intersects with other contextual disparities in structuring food-related inequalities in specific spatial contexts.
- Identify the spaces for possible intervention – households, local communities and beyond – and intervene on key norms, barriers, processes and perceptions that reproduce gender inequality and social exclusions; remember that focusing on women only rarely changes deep-rooted social behaviours and practices.
- Engage with those for whom change is desired in ways that enhance and do not diminish their knowledge(s), capacities and agency. This requires building on their values and meanings of food and place.

- And finally, understand that transforming entrenched gender-power relations requires connected, compelling interventions over extended periods of time, design initiatives for intervention with this insight.

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More information
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