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Implications of gender relations in healthy home food environments

Implicações das relações de gênero nos ambientes alimentares domésticos saudáveis

Abstract

Home food environments provide opportunities and practices related to food and nutrition and the promotion of healthy eating patterns. Due to gender constructions, women play a key role in these contexts, being historically and culturally associated with food care at home. Race and social class are considered factors that provide different experiences and levels of female agency in home food environments, with special impact on nutrition and health. Based on this, the present study proposes a reflection about the repercussions of relations between gender and home food environments. It also discusses how unfolded interactions between gender, race and economic inequalities affect food organization and care based on aspects that range from purchase and preparation of healthy foods to created consumption patterns. It is concluded that some factors such as unshared household chores, double work shift, overload, difficulty of accessing resources and foods and socioeconomic vulnerability are challenges to be overcome to build fair and healthy home food environments.

Keywords: Food Environment. Healthy Eating. Women's Work. Gender Inequality. Intersectionality.

Resumo

Ambientes alimentares domésticos condicionam oportunidades e práticas que se relacionam à nutrição e à promoção da alimentação saudável. Devido às construções de gênero, as mulheres têm papel fundamental nesses contextos, estando associadas histórica e culturalmente ao cuidado alimentar nos domicílios. Considera-se que fatores como raça e classe social proporcionam diferentes experiências e níveis de agência feminina em ambientes alimentares domésticos, reverberando sobretudo na alimentação e na saúde. A partir disto, este ensaio propõe uma reflexão sobre as repercussões das relações entre gênero e ambientes alimentares domésticos. Discute-se também como os desdobramentos das interações entre as desigualdades de gênero, raciais e econômicas incidem na organização e no cuidado com a alimentação, a partir de aspectos que vão desde a aquisição e preparo de alimentos saudáveis, a padrões de consumo criados. Conclui-se que a falta de compartilhamento do trabalho doméstico, a dupla jornada, a sobrecarga, a dificuldade de acesso a recursos e alimentos e a vulnerabilidade socioeconômica são alguns dos fatores que desafiam a constituição de ambientes alimentares domésticos justos e saudáveis.

Palavras-chave: Ambiente Alimentar. Alimentação Saudável. Trabalho Feminino. Desigualdade de Gênero. Interseccionalidade.

INTRODUCTION

Current food systems have been in the agenda of several areas and studies that point to the need for an overall transformation of the dynamics that cause environmental, socioeconomic, cultural impacts as well in public health.^{1,2} According to the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE),¹ the main dimensions of food systems are food production/supply chains; food environments and consumer behavior. These dimensions, when conceived in a healthy and sustainable manner, promote healthy and adequate eating habits.²

The agenda on food environment has gained strength in the discussions about food systems in view of the influence of macro-structural factors on food choices in external and personal domains.^{3,4} Food environment means the physical, economic, political and sociocultural context that surrounds people's interaction with the food system in the decision-making processes of purchasing, preparing and consuming foods.¹

Espinoza et al.³ define five environmental models: domestic, public spaces, institutional, restoration and food supply environments. Of these, one of the most complex environments is the domestic one due to the diversity of households, their condition and space of primary socialization, definition of preferences and cultural traditions.³

Women have historically, culturally and socially played a key role in home food environments for being directly associated with practices of family care.^{5,6} These are daily translated into aspects as decision-making about food choices, food purchases, cooking methods, sharing and diversifying meals.⁵⁻⁷

It should be noted that such dynamics are considered as unfolding of gender relationships and housework, which tended to be enhanced in the context of Covid-19 pandemic and social isolation.⁸ Therefore, meals can be considered a privileged dimension of care, from the point of view of continuity of supply, the quality of the foods provided every day and sociocultural issues that surround the eating act.⁹

It should be noted that not all women deal with such responsibility in the same way. Health and food care practices are impacted by structural issues that reveal numerous realities, especially in the Brazilian scenario, where race, gender and socioeconomic inequalities are historically constructed and considered social determinants of health.¹⁰

Canuto, Fanton & Lira¹⁰ say that the assessment of social and economic inequalities in accessing and consuming foods in the country is critical when the aim is to qualify public policies of health, food and nutrition. In this sense, it is important to understand that food choices and consumption by individuals in the context of home eating practices go through complex aspects and require an integral approach in order to ensure protection and promotion of a healthy and adequate nutrition based on real contexts.

So, this essay proposes a reflection about the repercussions of gender relations in home eating practices and, in parallel, how race and economic class inequalities interact in this context. Firstly, we will present brief considerations on food environments with the purpose of better understanding this component of the food system. Afterwards, we will address the home food environment and its connection with women's work, highlighting some discussions in the field of feminist studies on care. Finally, we will discuss aspects of the relations between gender, race and economic class and home food environments based on empirical studies.

Aspects of food environments

As mentioned, food environments refer to the physical, economic, political and sociocultural context that is related with the interaction of people with the wider food system.¹ Because it is a broad concept, food environments involve multiple aspects that make up a complex dynamic that is established between the processes of food choice, purchase and consumption by individuals.⁴

Food choice is not just a personal decision, considering that the dietary habits are shaped by the external scenario and driven by deeper systemic factors.² Thus, food prices, purchase patterns, marketing and labeling, food and agricultural policies, dietary guidelines, sanitary quality, mobility, geographic conditions, commercialization, food properties, availability of time and structure to cook, knowledge and skills to prepare food, preferences, cultural standards, and many other elements will interfere in the configuration of food environments.^{1,4}

The changes derived from globalization, food industrialization and ultra-processing and in the agricultural systems make that the current food systems do not favor healthy choices.^{2,4} Such circumstances have a direct impact on individuals' food choices and consumption and how they organize their eating patterns.

Similarly, how people access foods, the quality and types of foods purchased, ways of preparation and consumption, and the sociocultural meanings associated with the eating act may contribute to maintaining or transforming the characteristics of the food systems.² Thus, we can say that the articulation between food environments and food systems reflects systemically on the nutritional status of populations.^{2,4}

Studies about environmental influences on dietary habits is still a growing field of knowledge and has been aligned with discussions on inequalities and imbalances of hegemonic food systems.² Also, research studies on food environment carried out to date have focused, to a large extent, on the increase of obesity and noncommunicable chronic diseases in the developed countries.⁴

Social inequalities bring challenges to data collection and analysis in other contexts. In addition, the diversity of concepts on food environment, method and tools also poses some challenges.^{2,4} It is believed that a critical refinement and theoretical methodological adequacies in this research field may contribute to an integrated approach that favors analyses of food and nutrition, including in developing countries.⁴

Social, political, cultural and economic reasons are determinants of food environments, because they affect lifestyles, hinder access to foods and contribute to food inequalities.³ By being established asymmetrically, such drivers restrict the access to some healthy food groups and cause unequal outcomes in food and nutrition.² So, healthy, regulated and fair food environments provide more equitable foods availability and accessibility, allowing people to make food choices that have great potential to improve diets and promote health.¹

Several studies can be found on food environments using quantitative analyses about foods accessibility, availability and prices, indicating that qualitative and experiences-based approaches are still little studied.^{4,11,12} There is a need to know and understand food environments better, including who, what, when and why questions about foods purchase and consumption.⁴ Thus, more and better information on what individuals are eating and how they make their choices will likely contribute to coping with all forms of malnutrition.^{2,4}

An aspect that still remains little studied are home food environments. In Brazil, for example, homemade food still represents a great part of the foods eaten by our population. The Household Budget Survey (2017-2018) carried out by the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE)* (in English, Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) indicates that an average of 67.2% of household expenditures are spent on foods consumed at home.¹³ Therefore, domestic food environments are critical spaces for decisions on foods purchase, preparation and consumption, as well as the development of knowledges and food preferences.^{2,3}

It is worth noting that the food home environment comprises complex and systemic elements which, when interacting, have influence.¹⁴ For example, jobs offer, salary profile, social security, income distribution programs, etc., interfere in people's living conditions, with impact on the access to foods, in view of economic instability. Thus, the economic *status* affects the purchase and management of foods in terms of quantity, quality and variety.^{2,14}

In addition, the home food environment can be considered a complex and dynamic environment, because homemade foods are also affected by the availability of foods in other spaces.¹⁵ Foods are supplied through a large

variety of channels, which include groceries, corner stores, community vegetable gardens, restaurants, markets, supermarkets, etc.¹⁴

The home environment is interrelated with the community environment to the extent that proximity, infrastructure and mobility impact directly on the relation between home food and its surrounding.⁷ Once present at home, foods become part of the dynamic of the household members and their physical composition. Characteristics such as the visibility of foods, the household and kitchen structure and design and the availability of appliances and utensils collaborate in the decision on which foods to buy, cook and eat in the home space.¹⁴

It is important to underline that the presence of foods at home is also associated with the family's food preferences and the individuals' cultural traditions. Furthermore, parental rules and practices, the family size and organization of household chores are also factors that have an influence on home dietary practices.¹⁴

Therefore, women, when responsible for the household food management, comprising purchase and preparation of foods, have a particular influence on the families' eating habits and dietary decisions.¹⁵ So, it is crucial to reflect deeply on the relations between food environments, the woman's work and care, as discussed below.

Woman's work, care and home food environments

Over the years, social sciences have discussed the rupture of the notion of the individual as determined by biology, recognizing the notion of the human being constructed upon the bases of culture and history. The concept of gender is a category used to address the dimensions of the experiences of men and women from the sociocultural point of view. Therefore, there has been a society's expectation on how men and women should act and behave, which does not fit in the biological plan, but in the sociocultural level.¹⁶

About this, care has been considered a task historically associated with women, especially motherhood. Care has been understood as a social practice, comprising several material activities and relations connected with women's sociocultural role, aiming to meet the individuals' subjective and concrete needs. Such a movement requires emotional readiness and entails a sense of responsibility about the others' life and wellbeing.⁸ Care is an activity governed by gender and, far from being a natural female attribute, it is constructed on everyday relations by means of observations of daily activities.¹⁷

Satisfying the needs related to foods and nutrition in the home space, by means of directed tasks and actions, can be considered a female activity and related to care. The naturalization of this relation can be seen, for instance, by analyzing data published by IBGE. Of seven household tasks and cares performed by individuals in 2018, cooking was the one that showed the greatest difference between women and men with occurrence of 95.5% and 60.8%, respectively.¹⁸

It is also worth noting that cooking is a fertile ground for growing affections, memories and ancestral knowledges that are transmitted through generations in day-to-day experiences.^{5,19} In this context, having the ability to think, decide and act to prepare meals using mostly *in natura*, fresh and diversified foods, indicates the presence of a culinary autonomy, which broadens the possibility of promoting health in the home environment.²⁰ Therefore, cooking is an activity that brings benefits associated with people's health as it contributes to developing healthy dietary habits, and stimulates the maintenance of cultural knowledges and practices.²¹

Based on these considerations, we can infer that taking care of food and eating as a naturalized female practice entails the construction of healthy home food environments, considering the female work in planning, managing and executing actions involving food choices and consumption. About this, Petrics & Stamoulis⁷ point out that

environmental dimensions such as accessibility, affordability, convenience and desirability are directly impacted by gender inequalities that permeate women's lives.

An example that we could cite is about women's accessibility and mobility. The distance to retail stores to buy foods and the use of time, for example, are factors that interfere in the planning and consumption of foods.³⁷ The presence of retailers and concentration of stores that sell foods play a fundamental role in food choices and individuals' health. Living close to street fairs and markets that offers fresh, *in natura* foods, influences healthy eating-related actions.²²

In order to combine household chores and cares with daily commute to work, for example, women create strategies to cope with different activities according to the time and structure available. Thus, buying and cooking meals are activities where efforts and dedication become natural and are incorporated into a routine of reconciling home and work.⁷

Purchasing power, income, employability and economic dependence are strictly connected with economic viability and access to foods. These factors reflect on the possibility of achieving healthy diets.^{1,24} We point out that they represent an intense debate in the field of feminist studies when they analyze the women's share in the labor market and income levels.²³

According to data from IBGE,²⁴ women's participation in labor force is smaller than men's, being 54.5% and 73.7%, respectively. In addition, women received 77.7% of the total men's earnings in 2019.²⁴ With respect to jobs, black women occupy the most precarious and least paid activities. Data from IBGE²⁵ also point out that the black women workforce received about 44% of the total average salary of white men, for example.

Women's low pay and the high rate of participation in informal jobs, expressive of a scenario of irregularities,²³ hinder not only women's affordability to buy foods in sufficient quantity and quality but also have an influence on planning the meals that will be consumed by them and other household members.⁷ Such fact becomes still more complex when we observe one-parent families headed by women, in which women's earnings are the only source of money available to buy foods.^{7,14}

Another point that we could cite, based on Petrics & Stamoulis,⁷ refer to the convenience dimension. This is related to the context of fulfilling food needs according to the material and immaterial conditions established. Therefore, aspects such as time and effort to cook and consume foods, physical structure, culinary skills and food knowledge are some of the elements that have an influence on the consumption of healthy foods.^{1,9}

Women's double shift burden reflects not only on work overload and exhaustion, but mainly on the configuration of home food environments, as it is often associated with limited time available to cook meals. Thus, the consumption of ultra-processed foods and fast foods, for example, is a resource used to overcome lack of time.^{7,26}

When we make a more complex analysis of these relations, we note that how meals are organized at home and an uneven distribution of housework are one of the main factors that push for more "convenient" home eating practices and not necessarily the women's participation in the labor market.

We emphasize that the debate on social organization of care²⁷ should encompass the discussion on how society organizes food care and how women are part of this nexus. So, reducing the burden of all forms of malnutrition and providing healthy diets should be a collective responsibility,² and focusing on women's work should be a key point for conceiving healthy food home environments.

We emphasize that socioeconomic conditions influence the intensity of changes and problems in food consumption.¹⁰ Added to this aspect, we could cite the different female identities and their relations with racial

discrimination and class oppression that have an influence on the relations between women and nutrition in home food environment. From this point, we consider important to reflect on these issues, as follows.

Home food environments: relations between gender, race and social class

As already mentioned, women experiment different social situations that interfere in the construction of their experiences with home food environments. Therefore, we observe the importance of examining these relations from a perspective that integrates gender, race and social class as categories that interact with one another.²⁸ Studies on this issue are increasing as the inter-sectionality is presented as a theoretical and methodological tool used to analyze the correlation between different subordination axes of women's lives.^{28,29}

It is worth noting that the aim of inter-sectionality is to understand how social and economic structures, which appear in the form of racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other discriminatory systems, create inequalities and violate rights.²⁹ So, bringing to light the interactions of structural issues in the context of home food environments allows to recognize the existence of different social realities and their impacts on female agency and in the context of nutrition.

Racism, as an ideological construction, through which its practices are materialized in different discrimination processes, created a socioeconomically- marginalized mass in Brazil. Culturally-constructed attributes (such as race) also reproduce class places because the black population has experienced an unequal economic development. As a result, articulations between gender, race and economic class lead to a threefold discrimination process that black and low-income women still face.³⁰

According to Soares & Santos,⁶ the work on food and nutrition in Brazilian households has mostly involved female workforce, particularly enslaved, black and poor women. Even after the official end of slavery, the racial division of labor remained, making that it continued directly related to housework and the historical precariousness of the activity. For a reflection on this issue, just note that of the total number of household workers, 63% were black women.³¹

High-income women have more chances to remain in the labor market, especially because they usually employ household workers and have more resources and options to deal with food and meals.²⁷ An opposite situation can be seen when we examine experiences of black women and those in socioeconomic conditions of vulnerability. Data from IBGE based on skin color and race indicate that black and brown women are those who spend more time caring for people and performing household chores, working 18.6 hours per week compared with 17.7 hours of white women.³²

Women's share in the labor force and its relation with changes in dietary patterns reveals inequalities. Study by Lelis, Teixeira & Silva³³ with public workers in a university found that teachers were the group of women who less reported changes in the family's eating habits. This factor was related with higher monetary power, resulting in the presence of domestic workers and more time to prepare meals, conditions not available for technical-administrative workers.³³

The study by Lelis, Teixeira & Silva³³ also showed that regular and daily meals are ensured by higher purchasing power. Women with higher purchasing power had more opportunity to maintain constancy in meals and choose which foods to buy. Even with processed and convenience foods, the presence of *in natura* foods is an option for them.¹⁰ This is related with the findings of Canuto, Fanton & Lira,¹⁰ which showed that regular consumption of fruits and vegetables and more diversified meals are more frequent among white women and those with higher income than among black, brown, and low-income women.

With respect to the preparation of everyday meals, there is more likelihood of abdication of the culinary activity by middle- and upper-class women. Cooking can be recognized as a leisure or a tiresome activity, which women can avoid by going to restaurants, ordering delivery meals or hiring maids and cooks. So, the option for convenience foods or frequently eating out, particularly on weekends, are typical of this social niche.^{33,34}

Cooking, for low-income women, is almost always a tiresome and undervalued activity but one that must be done. Planning, preparing and serving foods every day, even after work, when they have to cook next-day lunches for their children and husbands, are tasks common to women from lower classes.²⁶

A study carried out by Abonizio & Jimenez-Jimenez³⁴ with women living in Cuiabá/MT, in social rise and especially part of middle- and upper-class, identified that social mobility favored the construction of new dietary habits and the consumption of new foods, changing their cooking and eating habits. It could be seen that they had resources and financial possibility of being concerned with their own eating and health, focusing on a higher consumption of fruits, vegetables and grains, for example.³⁴

But when it comes to black and low-class women, such scenario is quite different. Data from the *Rede Brasileira de Pesquisa em Soberania e Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional*,³⁵ (in English, Brazilian Survey Network on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security), of 2020, reveal that women, black people and those with low education are the groups that have less condition to achieve Food Security and are more exposed to Severe Food Insecurity. This aspect is associated not only with racial and socioeconomic inequalities but also with cultural aspects, where women in situation of vulnerability give up their own food in favor of feeding other family members.³⁶

Swan³⁷ reports that women in poverty situation usually develop complex, detailed and great knowledge on family budgets associating them with food preferences, needs and supply. According to this author, deciding on what everyone will eat is a difficult task, especially when there is shortage of money.

In studies conducted by Lopes, Jorge & Machado,²⁸ Rotenberg & De Vargas¹⁹ and Ferreira & Magalhães,³⁶ with women in situation of social vulnerability, they observed that their eating habits exhibited knowledge on nutrients and on the foods that were necessary to achieve healthy diets. Substitutions of foods, for example, were made based on analogies. In addition, they recognized the importance of great consumption of *in natura* foods, such as fruits, vegetables, leafy greens, grains and legumes. Even so, lack of money did not allow them to buy the foods that they considered healthy.

The way how food care is performed supports the ideas of being good mothers.³⁷ Offering adequate food for each age, being concerned with the purchase of foodstuffs, respecting mealtimes, the quality and quantity of foods, the consumption of rice, beans, meat and vegetables in the main meals and fruits and milk in the small meals, are part of the circumscribed norms that must be followed and support the ideal of mothers.^{9,36,38}

In the study by Lopes, Jorge & Machado³⁸ and Soares & Coelho,⁹ one can observe the concern of women in situation of vulnerability with the regularity of meals, especially with regard to children. When there is difficulty in achieving the expected goal of food provision, the idea of carelessness permeates the relations, putting the maternal identity in conflict. Such feelings generate sensations that are objectified in a particular way, resulting in women's feelings of inefficacy.⁹

Swan³⁷ states that purchasing foods for the family, for example, requires that women have planning and organization skills and knowledge, aspects that became difficult in the context of Covid-19. The author points out that, in a pandemic, middle- and upper-class white women have the possibility of deciding for food delivery services without the need to be exposed to crowded spaces. In contrast, says the author, poor women have to go to food selling establishments, venturing out and taking more risks of being contaminated by Covid-19.

The inequalities related to foods availability, access and preparation are exacerbated during the pandemic, because the socioeconomic vulnerability and confinement caused by the need for social isolation make that the relationships between women and food care become more difficult, aggravating social and economic inequalities.³⁷

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Food environments are crucial contexts for the promotion of healthy diets because they can provide good conditions for carrying out the processes involving purchase, selection and consumption of foods, when compared to a broader food system. Thus, the home food environment deserves attention for being a space of primary socialization, of construction of daily experiences with food and nutrition and regularity of meals, having women as the major agent of health promotion.

We note that the interactions between racial, gender and economic inequalities place a great emphasis on the domestic organization of care with food, in the purchase and preparation of healthy foods and in the created eating patterns, which shows the importance of an intersectional analysis. In this regard, we need to recognize how gender constructions, racism and disparities between social classes circumscribe the women's agency in home food environments.

Unshared domestic chores, double shift, overload, demands, difficulty of access to resources, mobility, socioeconomic vulnerability, among others, are some of the aspects that interfere with building fair and healthy home food environments, which emerge with distinct intensities, according to different women's realities.

Therefore, we point to the urgency of strengthening racism-fighting policies and improvement of women's social and economic conditions, mainly black and poor women, ensuring their rights. We consider that this allows more effectiveness and sustainability of measures that promote healthy food environments. Actions such as increasing the number of day care places, setting up community kitchens, including culinary education in schools, valuing household chores sharing and food care and creating job opportunities, for example, are measures that should be highlighted in the public debate.

However, other actions can be provided to transform sociocultural principles and practices. Examining how communication and information on adequate and healthy food have been carried out; which guidelines and values are promoted by different media channels and professionals, including health providers; how these messages reach and impact women and the society in general; all this can contribute to denaturalization processes and transformations.

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Contributors

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