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THE INTERFACE BETWEEN
URBANIZATION, GENDER
AND FOOD IN THE
GLOBAL SOUTH

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Abstract

The interface between urbanization, gender and food in the Global South offers a vantage point from which to think through the integrated nature of contemporary development challenges from both the structural elements of urban poverty and the ways in which urban residents navigate their cities. The starting point of this paper is that there is insufficient research from the vantage point where all three of these concepts interface, even as there is a rich body of literature at the interface of each pair of elements (e.g., gender and urbanization, gender and food, food and urbanization). This paper draws attention to the importance of the three-way interface through a review of literature on issues including the nature of households, household strategies, and the nutrition transition, with reference to economic, cultural, social, environmental, and epistemological concerns.

Keywords

gender, food, urbanization, households, development, women

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Introduction

Social categories that define men and women, boys and girls, based on concepts of masculinity and femininity play a key role in household food security in cities of the Global South. Gendered economic, environmental, and demographic processes also shape urban food systems. Food is fundamental to core goals of development: healthy people and environments, vibrant cultural and community life, and inclusive societies. The particular ways in which gender, food, and urbanization intertwine varies from place to place, but their fundamental interdependence is true for all cities, everywhere. The goal of this paper is to review research linking gender, poverty, and food, specifically in the urban context. The paper first describes the framing concept of the “gender-urban-food” interface, pointing out gaps as well as possibilities in theorizing this interconnection. Next, it interrogates conceptualizations of the “household” as used in much of the food security literature and as it appears at the gender-urban-food interface. The following sections discuss household food security strategies and the urban contexts within which they operate and the issue of nutrition and food choice. The paper concludes by pointing to policy and research directions rooted in the idea of the “gender-urban-food” interface.

The Gender-Urban-Food Interface

Researchers associated with the African Food Security Urban Network (AFSUN) have been at the forefront in applying a gender lens to household food security in Southern African cities (Dodson et al 2012, Riley and Dodson 2014, 2016a, 2016b). At the outset, the prospect of applying a gender lens to food security research seemed straightforward as expansive bodies of scholarship existed in the areas of urban development, food security, and gender inequality in the region. However, there was a lack of broad-based theorization drawing these areas of scholarship together. Hovorka’s (2006, 2012) contributions to feminist research on urban and

peri-urban agriculture in Botswana was a notable exception. Her “feminist foodscapes framework” has shown that “gender dynamics permeate all scales, realms and actors associated with the urban food system, even when gender is not self-evident” (Hovorka 2013: 123). Gender and food are “power-laden realms that produce and reproduce difference and inequality between men and women through their connections” (Hovorka 2013: 125). As such, they are simultaneously universal and personal, material and ideological. Mackay’s (2019a, 2019b) feminist analysis of urban food and health environments in Uganda is a recent notable example of work at the gender-urban-food interface in the Global South.

Steele (2008: ix) has written that “food and cities are so fundamental to our everyday lives that they are almost too big to see. Yet if you put them together, a remarkable relationship emerges.” The very existence of cities is predicated on food being available, and the urbanization of economies, societies, and spaces has shaped the food system in myriad ways, from how food is produced and distributed to what is eaten by whom, when, where, and why. The literature on “urban food security” has not adequately engaged with the field of gender and development, however, nor with feminist food studies. Equally, the “gender and urban poverty” literature has not adequately engaged with the field of food studies. And finally, the “gender and food/gender and nutrition” literatures have not adequately considered the significance of urbanization. Addressing these gaps can help to foster an integrative understanding of food security, working to challenge the “silos” that characterize neoliberal approaches to development in the twenty-first century (Sen and Mukherjee 2014, Struckman 2018).

The need for this integrative approach arises in part from the reality that urban populations in the Global South are increasingly female: rising female migration and the demographic reality that women outlive men mean that women will soon make up the majority of urban citizens (Chant and McIlwaine 2016). It is widely known that gender and poverty are closely linked in urban environments, although the causal mechanisms implied by the

intersection of the “feminization of poverty” and the “urbanization of poverty” continue to generate debate (Bradshaw et al 2017). There are many ways in which urban life works against the economic interests of women, including in urban labour market segmentation, built environments that separate home and work spaces, cities where women cannot travel safely, and the lack of infrastructure that greatly increases the time cost of reproductive tasks (Oyelaran-Oyeyinka and Kiwala 2013). Food can be inserted into each of these factors: lower incomes suppress food access, built environments shape the physical accessibility of food, constrained mobility limits food access options, and food preparation is one of the costliest of reproductive tasks in terms of time. On the other hand, urbanization is also associated with changing gender roles that can open up new economic, social, and political opportunities for women and redefine gender identities (Chant 2013, Evans 2014). Pro-poor, gender-informed food systems can be instrumental in unlocking these potential benefits of urbanization for women.

The notion of the gender-urban-food interface captures these multiple linkages. Its main value is to expose the extensive effects, both negative and positive, of policies, practices, economic changes, and social conventions that reverberate across the research and development policy worlds. This paper reviews literature addressing key topics at the interface. One of the constraints to connecting gender, food, and cities is the lack of disaggregated data including urban-specific data on food and poverty (Satterwaithe 2014), food and nutrition security data on urban households (Ruel et al 2017), and gender-disaggregated data on food and nutrition in cities of the Global South. The following section turns attention to a key challenge in understanding the current state of urban food security from a gender perspective: i.e. the use of the household as a social unit, which binds men and women together and erases important intra-household differences.

Gendering Urban Households

Any exploration of the gender-urban-food interface entails addressing perennial problems with the use of the “household” as the basis for measuring and discussing food security prevalence in cities (Carr 2006, Coates 2013, Webb et al 2006). In spite of the complexity of the household as a social unit for food security measurement, its importance in terms of daily food procurement and consumption practices justifies its central position in the food security literature. The experience with AFSUN’s large food security dataset of over 6,000 urban households has shown the difficulties of teasing out gender differences between men and women from household level data (Dodson et al 2012). Defined by AFSUN as a group of people who “normally eat from the same pot”, household-level data is predicated on the assumption that all members of a food secure household are food secure individuals, and vice-versa for food insecure households. However, there is ample evidence that intra-household gender differences often mean uneven experiences of food security within households (Bargain et al 2018, De Vreyer and Lambert 2018, Quisumbing 2013). These intra-household dynamics were more easily teased out in qualitative research conducted in Blantyre, Malawi, when residents were asked open-ended questions, including questions about how food is distributed and allocated within their households (Riley 2013, Riley and Dodson 2014, 2016a). The detailed qualitative view illustrated the considerable diversity of households even within a single small city, each of which is also subject to frequent changes in membership that make them highly dynamic entities. In urban environments like Blantyre, economic precarity also means that households and household members can experience rapid and dramatic changes in food security status.

The gender-urban-food interface also highlights the different meanings of the term “household” in different parts of the world, which can be masked in large-scale data based on standardized definitions (Coates et al 2006, Liu et al 2015, Randall et al 2011). Differences in the nature of households in Nanjing, China, and Maputo, Mozambique,

for example, were clearly exposed in a comparative study of the two cities for the Hungry Cities Partnership (Riley and Caesar 2018). In Nanjing, all households are registered with the state and this administrative definition of household membership and headship was used in the survey. In Maputo, where there is no formal system of household registration, households were primarily defined by respondents in terms of who “eats from the same pot”. This example of administrative differences in Nanjing and Maputo is indicative of the diverse cultural, religious, economic, and administrative factors that shape household definitions in cities across the Global South. Moreover, there is vast internal social and cultural diversity in many cities along with rapidly changing social norms.

At the household level, researchers often use the concept of the “female-headed household” as a way of identifying gendered vulnerability to hunger and poverty. A pioneering report on female-headed households in development found a “direct relationship between modernization and rise of female-headed households” (Buvunic et al 1978: 1). The report linked urbanization (a hallmark of “modernization”), female headship, and poverty. Subsequent empirical evidence undermined these associations as a universal rule (Quisumbing et al 2001). Female household headship in cities is now treated with greater sophistication. One study found that the gender of the household head is only one of several factors that interact with variables such as age, education level, number of members, income, and type of food security being measured to influence which households are food secure (Riley and Legwegoh 2018). Factors such as the availability of social services, gender discrimination in employment, and social attitudes toward women’s independence also shape gendered access to the financial and other resources that allow households to be food secure.

Food security researchers need to be responsive to the changing nature of urban households, not only in terms of their size and composition but also in how they are conceptualized, experienced, and reproduced. People’s ability to change their

attitudes about gender roles and identities appears to be enhanced in the urban context, even when economic, legal, and political structures are slow to change. Barker (2014), for example, found that urban men in the Global South were far more likely than their rural counterparts to accept women’s expanded roles outside of the home and men’s expanded roles in the domestic sphere. Riley and Dodson’s (2016a) study of Blantyre concluded that men accepted changing gender roles, or at least said so even if they did not actually take more responsibility for daily food provisioning. In terms of the gender-urban-food interface, enlightened attitudes among urban men are insufficient without the food component, including real time invested by men in domestic tasks and material changes to the food system to make it more gender-equitable across a city. Nonetheless, it is promising that changing urban households could become more gender equitable and, in the process, more food secure.

Urban Household Food Security Strategies

Moving on from what households are, this section explores the gendered nature of what households do, or rather what household members do – collectively and separately – to feed themselves. At the gender-urban-food interface, urban livelihoods, household assets, labour market segmentation, infrastructure (including what tools, appliances and energy sources are available in the home for cooking), social norms, and legal entitlements are all relevant factors for understanding household food security. Internal and external power dynamics and short- and long-term conditions shape the calculus of how households strategize in terms of who goes (or gets sent) out to work, who does what reproductive tasks, who earns what, who makes budget decisions, and who is responsible for purchasing, cooking, allocating, serving, and generally worrying about food. The diversity of urban environments means that there is geographical variability in how these decisions are conditioned, but contemporary urban life is generally characterized by rapid

change, such that urban households are constantly adapting to new challenges and opportunities.

The intra-household bargaining framework captures the internal politics of households, where decision-making is gendered and members often have competing interests and control over resources (Agarwal 1997). Women's bargaining power within the household is enhanced by increased levels of education, income, and assets (Doss 2013). An increasing trend in low-income urban households is a shift towards female breadwinners and de facto female-headed households (Chant and McIlwaine 2016). There is reason to expect that this trend has some positive impact on urban food security outcomes. In low-income areas in Southern African cities, when factors such as household income, and education of the head are controlled for, the disadvantage of having a female head disappears, and in some cases even becomes an advantage for household members (Dodson et al 2012, McCordic et al 2018, Riley and Legwegoh 2018). Similar findings have been observed in urban Brazil (Felker-Kantor and Wood 2012), suggesting a global trend that builds on women's changing economic opportunities in cities, their knowledge of food and experience of food provisioning, and their conventional reproductive roles. These observations resonate with the ample evidence from rural or rural/urban aggregated studies showing a correlation between women's control over financial and other household resources and positive outcomes for children's nutrition and education (Burroway 2016, Carlson et al 2015, Kennedy and Peters 1992, Quisumbing et al 1998). Yet, as Levin et al (1999) note in Accra, Ghana, even though female household heads were relatively successful at minimizing household food insecurity at low incomes, there was a high cost in terms of the sacrifice of other long-term investments (such as health and education) and a chronic vulnerability to external shocks such as food price spikes.

The vulnerability of urban households is related to the fact that household food security strategies of the poor in many cities takes place within a context of largely informal food systems and informal sector economies. Chen et al (2016: 3) note that the

informalization of urban livelihoods is a growing trend worldwide, meaning that urban expansion and the rising prosperity of societies in the Global South is not translating into secure, well-paid employment. More than half (53%) of all workers in urban areas in the Global South are employed informally, and the figure for African urban workers is three in four (76%) (ILO 2018: 26). A higher percentage of employed men than women are in informal employment (63% versus 58%), but higher rates of women in informal employment are found in countries with lower GDP per capita. Informally employed women also tend to be in more vulnerable and precarious positions (ILO 2018: 20). Informal work is diverse and not always correlated with poverty, but it is generally emblematic of economic precarity and a lack of formal support structures such as unemployment insurance, pension savings, and paid parental and medical leave. According to the ILO (2018), informal employment is not a choice but rather the result of a lack of opportunity for formal employment. The main impact on food security is difficulty in earning sufficient money to access food in cities.

Informality is also an important concept in the gender-urban-food interface because urban food systems make up a large share of urban informal economies (Atkinson 1995, Crush and Frayne 2011, Skinner and Haysom 2017). The informal food system provides livelihoods, especially for women, and food distribution and retailing systems that are important for food access by low-income residents. Ironically, the informal systems that distribute food throughout urban neighbourhoods at affordable prices also reproduce the kinds of precarious informal employment that sustain high levels of poverty (Chen et al 2016, Mupedziswa and Gumbo 2001, Johnston-Anumonwo and Doane 2011). Floro and Swain (2012: 89) examine occupational choice and food security in 14 "predominantly slum communities" in cities across the Global South and find that "the fact that the majority of workers in these areas tend to find work in the informal sector, earn variable income, and have little or no access to private or social insurance, has made access to sufficient food a grave problem." The cycle of low income, reduced food budgets, and food insecurity

is gendered in the sense that women earn less for their informal labour and are expected to dedicate a larger share of their income to food.

Physical elements of urban food systems, such as markets, street vendors, neighbourhood shops, taverns, and restaurants, are essential place-making elements of cities, which in turn shape gendered roles and identities. Many cities have vibrant traditions of market women and prosperous street food vendors whose economic activities are technically informal and yet deeply embedded in urban economic and social life (Guyer 1987, Tinker 1997). Wardrop's (2006) case study of Durban, South Africa, showed the important role of female street vendors in reproducing urban culture while feeding people in public and private spaces. Kawarazuka et al (2018) found that men and women operated very differently within Hanoi's urban food system, with women gaining access to resources through social networks and men preferring "capital-based access" with limited social interactions. This social dimension also extends to human-scale rural-urban linkages with distinctly gendered roles of food production, trading, and transporting food informally between places (Agergaard et al 2010, Bah et al 2003, Flynn 2005). An illustrative example from Blantyre was the case of a retired man and his wife who attended all major social events in his wife's village, such as weddings, funerals, and holidays, in part to maintain the social ties that underpinned her customary farmland entitlement in the matrilineal community (Riley 2013). The maize they produced on this farmland was essential to their food security as an urban household living on income from a small public sector pension.

Urban food production is an important element of urban food systems and there is now a vast advocacy literature on urban and peri-urban agriculture in the Global South (de Zeeuw and Drechel 2015, Lee-Smith 2013). However, the general impact of urban and peri-urban agriculture on food security is context-specific rather than universally important (Crush et al 2018). These activities range from the very small, such as table-top gardens (White 2015), to large-scale commercial enterprises in and around cities (Hovorka 2006). The scale and kind

of operation in urban food production tends to be gendered, with women more likely to engage in small-scale production for household consumption (Hovorka and Lee-Smith 2006). This reflects men's control over resources including the land and financial capital required for larger-scale enterprises (Hovorka et al 2009).

From the vantage point of the gender-urban-food interface, the socio-cultural function of urban food production comes into view. Slater (2001: 635) found that research on urban agriculture (UA) in Southern Africa was overly focused on the economic aspects of food production, but that "women use UA in processes of empowerment, to establish social networks, to symbolize a sense of security and to encourage community development." Shillington's (2008, 2013) research in Managua found that food-bearing trees planted in household gardens were not only a source of food; they were also critical to the production of a sense of "home" within the city. Caring for the trees was an extension of women's roles as food providers and producers of spaces that are recognizably home-like. These examples illustrate the broader significance of food in the urban context, which goes far beyond the commercial transactions and physical health impacts that tend to receive the most attention in the literature. Urban household food strategies are aimed at more than simply accessing adequate food to meet basic caloric needs; they also aim to reproduce cultures, shape urban environments, and reinforce social bonds.

Gendered Food Consumption and Nutrition

The "nutrition transition" from locally-sourced, minimally-processed traditional foods to highly processed foods made from globally traded commodities is a major challenge for urban food security in the Global South (Abrahams et al 2011, Bloem and de Pee 2017). The transition is associated with rising levels of obesity and non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and heart disease. This has given rise to the triple burden of malnutrition: the

coexistence of hunger (insufficient caloric intake to meet dietary energy requirements), undernutrition (prolonged inadequate intake of macro- and micro-nutrients), and overnutrition in the form of overweight and obesity (IFPRI 2017: 13). These trends are occurring within the same urban populations, with the health effects of malnourishment and obesity sometimes experienced in the same household or by the same individual (Ruel et al 2017). Women are also more likely to be obese, particularly in developing countries and among the urban poor, due to various local factors such as cultural norms of gendered consumption and the appreciation of larger body sizes for women in many cultures (Kantor and Caballero 2012).

The nutritional aspects of food security in cities intersect with gender concerns as men and women have different nutritional needs over the life course and in relation to reproductive health. This is an important addition to the critique of the “household” as the unit of analysis since a household could be food secure for a man but lacking appropriate foods for pregnant or lactating women. Research in Burkina Faso’s Ouagadougou (Becquey and Martin-Prevel 2010) and Bamako in Mali (Kennedy et al 2009) found evidence that urban women’s diets were not meeting the micronutrient needs of women of reproductive age. In South Africa, Vorster et al (2011) identify five place-based categories of women (rural women living in deep rural areas; rural women from farms; women living in informal settlements; urban middle class women, and urban upper class women). None of these groups was meeting all the measured micronutrient needs and only the last came close to meeting most needs. These findings went against the assumption that urban diets provide adequate micronutrients because they contain both a variety of foods and artificially enriched processed foods. While these types of foods are more widely available in cities, they are inaccessible, undesirable, or unincorporated into diets for other reasons. Legwegoh and Hovorka (2016), for example, found that the benefits of a diverse and abundant availability of foods in Gaborone, Botswana, were outweighed by a cultural preference for beef, reliance on food eaten

outside of the home, and convenience foods with less nutritional benefit.

The increased share of food eaten outside the home or chosen for convenience over taste or nutrition is partly related to women’s changing economic roles in cities, including more work outside the home and less time for food-related tasks (Ruel et al 2017). Convenience foods require less frequent shopping trips because they are processed and preserved. They also take less time and energy to prepare and require less cooking and preparation than traditional foods. These considerations make the nutritional trade-off worthwhile for women who are working outside the home and have less time to shop and cook. The changes are more pronounced in middle-income countries in the Global South where convenience foods are more readily available due to the influence of global supply chains, the penetration of supermarkets, and industrialized food processing. The availability of these options, and the tools for cooking and storing food that are more widely available in urban settings in middle income countries, can have a liberating effect on women’s domestic labour. In these ways, global economic change, changing gender roles, and nutritional changes are intertwined in cities of the Global South.

The nutrition transition thesis can imply the imposition of change from the outside, but it is mediated through local factors influencing consumer choice and food preferences. Urban diets are characteristically more eclectic and diverse than rural diets (Ruel et al 2017). Meat is widely seen as representing the prosperity associated with urban lifestyles. Processed foods are highly marketed to urban mass markets and a common sales pitch is to associate these foods with outwardly oriented global cultures, prosperity, and leisure (Noack and Pouw 2015). Place- and gender-based associations of specific foods are evident in Blantyre, where there was a clear overlap between foods associated with rurality and foods associated with women, but little parallel overlap with men’s foods and urban foods (Riley and Dodson 2016b). The changing meaning of foods in cities is intertwined with evolving gender

identities and, in the case of Malawi at least, disrupt the linearity of the nutrition transition model. The gender-urban-food interface helps reveal the localized, real-world conditions in which people make their economically constrained food choices on a daily basis.

Conclusion

What people eat in cities of the Global South reflects their intersecting urban, gender, class, religious, regional, and ethnic identities. It also reflects the globalized food system and the foods that are available and accessible in urban environments. The gender-urban-food interface brings the personal and the global into a single framework, prioritizing an integrated and multi-scalar approach. It also provides a way of grappling with inter-related economic and socio-cultural factors that shape food choices and affect the outcomes of development interventions aimed at such goals as gender-sensitive nutrition security.

By engaging with the gender-urban-food interface, researchers can help to build bridges between the silos of development policy and practice and show the intersecting dimensions of food insecurity, gender inequality, and urban poverty. Achieving food security for cities in the Global South necessitates grappling with practical challenges (e.g. building market spaces, facilitating affordable food sources, strengthening urban livelihoods) and strategic elements (e.g. envisioning sustainability in the local environment, promoting democratic institutions for local decision-making, realizing the right to food for the urban poor). The gender-urban-food interface and the integrative thinking it generates is useful not only for understanding the problem but for thinking through potential solutions.

The research on female-headed households, intra-household inequalities, informal employment and informal food systems in cities, urban and peri-urban agriculture, nutrition, and food choice reviewed in this paper demonstrates that gender shapes food practices and food security in cities of

the Global South. Food and urban food systems also shape gendered practices, roles, and identities in cities, and gendered food practices and consumption patterns shape and are shaped by urban environments, cultures, and economies. This paper provides a broad overview that illustrates multiple conceptual and empirical inter-connections that can deepen overall understanding of urban food security in the Global South. There is a need for further research that explores these connections in specific city contexts, including their embeddedness in the wider systems through which food is circulated, accessed, and consumed.

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