

# Contemporary Vestals in the Masterchef's Kitchen: Doing and Undoing Gender in Domestic Food Practices

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Agnieszka MAJ,<sup>1</sup> Wojciech GOSZCZYŃSKI<sup>2</sup> and Anna WÓJTEWICZ<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This article aims to analyse how domestic food practices, along with the associated motivations and behaviour patterns, either reinforce or challenge binary gender models in households. The theoretical framework is based on Harold Garfinkel's (1967) concept of 'doing gender' and contemporary studies (Ehlert, 2021; Pettersson & Heldt, 2014; Szabo, 2014) that highlight tensions between cultural patterns defining gender roles in the kitchen and phenomena contributing to the blurring of gender inequalities in everyday life. Qualitative data (individual in-depth interviews) collected in two separate studies conducted in Poland between 2020 and 2022 were used as the research material. The analysis of this material reveals two key figures: the Vestal, referring to women who assume responsibility for others and are focused on the domestic hearth, and the Masterchef, who is typically male and engages in cooking only occasionally. Emerging trends, such as men's increasing attention to the body and food, the growing importance of declaring shared responsibilities, and shifting attitudes towards cooking as a leisure activity, do not yet appear to be leading to fundamental changes in the processes through which gender is constructed or deconstructed in relation to domestic life and food practices.

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology and Education, Warsaw University of Life Sciences, Poland

<sup>2</sup> Nicolaus Copernicus University, Poland

Corresponding author: Wojciech Goszczyński, [goszczyński@umk.pl](mailto:goszczyński@umk.pl)

## Biographical notes

**Agnieszka Maj** is an assistant professor at the Department of Sociology and Pedagogy of the Warsaw University of Life Sciences (SGGW). Her research focuses on the social determinants of body care and physical appearance, the social determinants of obesity, and the sociology of food. She is also interested in the practical applications of modern technologies.

**Wojciech Goszczyński** is a sociologist specialising in food, agriculture, community development and sustainable development. He is a professor at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.

**Anna Wójtewicz** is an assistant professor at the Institute of Sociology at Nicolaus Copernicus University. She specialises in the body, social practices, masculinity, and consumer society. As a researcher, she prefers qualitative data collection methods.

## Acknowledgments

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3. This research did not involve the use of animals.
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## Introduction

This article focuses on contemporary processes that reinforce or challenge gender roles in domestic food practices. Its theoretical framework is rooted in Harold Garfinkel's (1967) concept of 'doing gender', along with its subsequent iterations (Kessler & McKenna, 1987; Butler, 2004; Nentwich & Kelan, 2014). Additionally, the paper draws on analyses of processes occurring at the intersection of the traditional and the modern, combining practices of food consumption, gender, and household management (Ehlert, 2021; Pettersson & Heldt, 2014; Szabo, 2014). These studies indicate tensions between cultural patterns defining gender roles in the kitchen and phenomena that contribute to the blurring of gender inequalities in everyday life. This article's primary goal is to analyse how domestic food practices either reinforce or challenge binary gender models in households. We seek to understand which elements of this profoundly cultural yet essential activity—crucial for both our physical survival and domestic food preparation—resonate most strongly with how individuals and their environments construct and reconstruct gender roles. Such dynamics may contribute to the emergence of new elements in the cultural dimensions of femininity and masculinity.

### Why doing and undoing gender?

The classic concept of 'doing gender' emerged in 1967; however, it gained prominence in the social sciences through the seminal article by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman (1987), published in *Gender and Society*. According to this framework, social roles—rooted in social, cultural, and institutional contexts—not only define societal expectations regarding specific behaviour patterns of women and men but also serve as principles for evaluating the behaviour of others. The concept of doing gender emphasises the interactional dimension of gender, defined as 'a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine "natures"' (West & Zimmerman, 1987:126). Rather than viewing gender as an inherent property of individuals, this perspective considers it an emergent feature of social situations: both a result and a justification of various social arrangements, and a means of legitimising one of the most fundamental social divisions (West & Zimmerman, 1987). A significant development of the theory was introduced nearly two decades later by Judith Butler (2004), who explored whether and how gender could be undone. She defined this undoing as a form of escape from gender understood as compelled performance. According to Butler (2004), individuals have limited freedom in doing gender when faced with the deeply embodied manifestations of other people's activities: 'a paradox of autonomy, a paradox that is heightened when gender regulations work to paralyze gendered agency at various levels'. In response to Butler's embodied interpretation of doing gender, West and Zimmerman initiated a renewed discussion of the term in light of developments in gender studies (Jurik & Siemsen, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 2009). Today, doing gender remains a widely employed perspective, both theoretically and analytically, with the concept proposed by West and Zimmerman gaining new dimensions over time.

In the context of this article's theme, both West and Zimmerman, as well as Butler, significantly lean towards theorising gender as a social practice. However, their approaches differ. West and Zimmerman analyse interactions through which gender is reproduced, sustaining inequalities (Deutsch, 2007). Butler's considerations focus more on doing gender and how it is performed for real or potential audiences (Butler, 2004; Poggio, 2006; Nentwich & Kelan, 2014). Although both approaches employ the concept of undoing gender, their interpretations diverge. For West and Zimmerman, undoing gender refers to the reduction of differences between genders, for example in situations where gender is not pivotal to the creation of meaning. In this framework, undoing gender is considered possible only to a limited extent (Hirschauer, 2001; Deutsch, 2007). In contrast, Butler's understanding of doing gender is slightly different. It focuses on the question of how alternative performances might make it possible "to change the dominant gender order and the binary understanding of masculinity and femininity" (Poggio, 2006; Connell, 2010; Nentwich & Kelan, 2014).

It is worth emphasising that contemporary social research not only increasingly relies on the categories of



masculinity and femininity derived from participants' self-identifications or assumed *a priori* but also defines gender through the lens of social practices enacted by individuals (West & Zimmerman, 2009; Nentwich & Kelan, 2014). Notably, subsequent theoretical waves have conceptualised gender as both spoken and performed, and as a situated social practice (Butler, 2004). An essential aspect of contemporary thinking about doing gender, understood as a routine action in social interactions, is its embedding in social hierarchies, inequalities, social structures, and systems of power in which individuals are entangled (Nentwich & Kelan, 2014). Gender identity itself emerges as a more fluid and flexible category, which can be performed by individuals depending on the context, or as Butler puts it, depending on what is permitted by one's position and the prevailing discourse (Gherardi, 2005; Brickell, 2005; Butler, 2004).

This article addresses the question of whether and how gender is defined and redefined in food-related practices. Specifically, it examines whether contemporary approaches to home cooking reinforce and stabilise the gender order or, alternatively, pave the way for a cultural revolution starting with the plate.

### **Gender Gastropolitics in the Household**

Arjun Appadurai (1981), in his seminal study on tensions surrounding the place and role of women in domestic kitchens, referred to food as a semiotic device. Food is an artefact through which power relations are constructed, both at the macro level (food policies) and the micro level (family models, intimate relationships) (Appadurai, 1981). Those who purchase, prepare, and serve food, or decide the course of the meal and the type of dishes served, reflect a complex social hierarchy. Food signals and shapes the unequal status of genders (Appadurai, 1981; Counihan & Kaplan, 1998; Counihan, 2012; Botreau & Cohen, 2020; Crowther, 2013). Food-related practices serve to regulate status, reify roles, and signify privilege. This occurs through the symbolism and values associated with food, the delineation of responsibilities and socially accepted divisions of labour, and finally, the relationships built around it.

Whether preparing a lunchbox (Harman & Cappellini, 2015; Harman & Cappellini, 2018), dining out, shopping in a supermarket, or buying at farmers' markets (Taylor et al., 2022), we participate in a complex social process that positions us vis-à-vis others (Chen, 2016). This leads us to the concept of gastropolitics, which Gillian Crowther (2013) describes as 'social order in action' or social rules. Gastropolitics can be understood as how individuals or groups, intentionally or unintentionally, build mutual relationships and positions through food and food-related practices. It is a process of identity work that operates at many levels of social systems (Crowther, 2013), with relevance to the household. Food-related activities, including meal consumption, daily preparation, and provisioning, are among the so-called practices of 'recreating' or 'reproducing' the home. These activities ensure households can endure over time: '(...) Routine household tasks include cooking, cleaning, and laundry, and are considered to be female-typed, while intermittent tasks include home maintenance, yard work, and managing finances, and are described as male-typed tasks' (Ross-Plourde & Lachance-Grzela, 2025; Geist & Ruppner, 2018).

Food is often a central element of household organisation, defining its members' configuration and status relationships. With modernity and the increasing prevalence of work outside the home, some tasks related to food provisioning and meal preparation for family members have also shifted beyond the household. Consequent to production changes initiated during industrialisation, an increasing proportion of household budgets is now allocated to food prepared outside the home (Trubek, 2013; Poulain, 2017; Julier, 2013).

Despite these changes, the responsibility for preparing meals for family members still predominantly falls on women, and this work is typically unpaid (Counihan, 2012; Risman, 2018:23). However, this process can also have functional aspects. Preparing and sharing food among family members can be understood as part of a mutual exchange system. It enables the rooting and stability of relationships with reciprocal obligations because food is personalised and imbued with meaning (Bachórz, 2018). Cooking can strengthen women's positions

in the community, facilitate economic independence, support household budgets, and act as a mechanism for maintaining identity (Williams-Forson, 2006; Belasco, 2008; Crowther, 2013; Król, 2020).

As Elisabeth Dunn (2004) observes, the domestic production of food from scratch, combined with sharing it in families, can serve as a domain of individual agency, authenticity, and a fundamental way of expressing femininity and motherhood. However, McIntosh and Zey (1992) argue that this responsibility does not imply equal status within the household. Similar to DeVault (1991), Charles and Kerr (1989) also point out that while food preparation can be a potential source of influence over husbands and children, a specific dimension of subordination remains (Counihan & Kaplan, 1998).

Men's domestic culinary activities are associated with different practices, positions, and meanings. Stereotypically, 'men's cooking' is perceived as more than just satisfying hunger; it carries additional meanings and is often seen as a manifestation of genius (Vester, 2015). As Gillian Crowther (2013) observes, men in the kitchen are frequently viewed as 'taste experts', while women are assigned the monotonous task of preparing everyday meals (Sumpter, 2015). Narratives about men's cooking frequently imply that if men took cooking seriously, they would quickly surpass women in skill (Vester, 2015:67).

With its professionalisation and commodification, cooking has increasingly been appropriated by men, who organise professional kitchens according to gendered relational patterns, simultaneously eliminating women from the field (Counihan, 2012; Sumpter, 2015; Haddaji et al., 2018; Hryciuk, 2019). In particular, meat consumption is closely tied to the model of hegemonic masculinity (Counihan, 2012; Lupton, 1996; Adams, 1990; Nath, 2010; Sumpter, 2015). Stereotypes about masculinity are reflected in the consumption of animals and dominance over the natural environment. Vegetarian and vegan men are viewed as less 'masculine' than their meat-eating counterparts (Thomas, 2016), as they 'renounce' one of the fundamental masculine 'privileges' (Adams, 1990; Twigg, 1986; Nath, 2010; Chałupnik & Brookes, 2022).

Chałupnik and Brookes (2022) analyse media discourses on vegetarian men in relation to the concept of 'hybrid masculinity', which refers to the selective incorporation of identity elements typically associated with marginalised and subordinated forms of masculinity, and occasionally femininity, into men's gender representations and identities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Notably, the discourse around veganism among men is evolving. Beyond the stereotypical framing of veganism as a rejection of hegemonic masculinity, public discourse increasingly offers alternative interpretations that do not position veganism against masculinity (Brookes & Chałupnik, 2022). Chałupnik and Brookes identify several alternative narratives in their research. For example, being vegan is framed as more masculine than 'being a meat-eater', as it requires rejecting one of the key markers of hegemonic masculinity. Diet—what one eats or does not eat—can thus serve as an element in constructing models of masculinity distinct from hegemonic norms (Nath, 2010; Brookes & Chałupnik, 2022).

Beyond the various attributes of physical attractiveness expected of women and men, the ideals of health associated with male and female bodies also differ. For men, health is often equated with strength and physical endurance, and for women, with a slim figure. These differing ideals can influence their approaches to 'healthy eating' (Van Dyke, 2018). Traditional constructions of masculinity focus on the pursuit of strength, with men being encouraged to eat hearty meals, and a robust appetite seen as synonymous with good health. In contemporary times, these trends have been reshaped by an emphasis on sculpting the male body. It is no longer merely the abundance of a meal but also its functionality—its connection to physical performance, muscle mass, and bodywork—that has become a key element of men's culinary practices. These new patterns are now being incorporated into the hegemonic model of masculinity (Jensen, 2023).



## Materials and Methods

Our research was conducted in Poland. Situated in the borderlands of Central and Eastern Europe, the country's food practices and gender constructions are shaped by a dynamic interplay between processes of social change and development, on the one hand, and deeply rooted traditions, on the other. This dynamic is highlighted by Kopczyńska and Zielińska (2015) in their study on the dietary choices of Polish men and women. The authors point out that in this country, positioned between high- and middle-income economies, contemporary processes that loosen gender boundaries coexist—and often collide—with traditional divisions. This interplay between exogenous and endogenous processes, along with the persistence of certain culinary practices, particularly those tied to household management, is gradually being reshaped under the pressures of modernisation (Mroczkowska, 2019; Suwada, 2021). In this context, tradition clashes with modernity, progressive attitudes with conservative ones, and sustainable development with the growing dominance of the food processing industry (Parasecoli et al., 2025:8). Petr Jehlička et al. (2020) highlight these interactions in their analysis of the potential embedded in family and household practices, food-related activities, and enduring traditions of home food processing, all of which intersect with emerging family models.

Bachórz (2018) and Straczuk (2016; 2018) highlight the important role of the family and household as food-producing units in Poland, which historically enabled people to cope with food supply uncertainties during the communist era. The production of homemade food continues to be understood as more than mere provisioning: it remains significant in fostering independence from external (economic or political) conditions and expressing a sense of belonging to a community. Poland, and more broadly Central and Eastern Europe, thus constitutes an important case study whose relevance extends beyond this already substantial region of the world (Parasecoli et al., 2025).

In this article we focus on domestic food practices, which we define as all activities related to the preparation and consumption of meals in the household, including food provisioning, meal preparation, and eating. We limit the scope of our research to food-related practices and do not consider other household activities, as is sometimes done in studies of gender role divisions in the household or gender convergence (Altintas & Sullivan, 2016; Geist & Ruppner, 2018). We adopt Ewa Kopczyńska's definition of food practices as 'ways of doing things together: eating, feasting, choosing, cooking' (Kopczyńska, 2021:28).

Our study relies on qualitative secondary analysis, understood as the reprocessing of data generated in previous research projects (Hammersley, 2010; Sarah & Winterton, 2012; Ruggiano & Perry, 2019). Analyses were conducted with due attention to changes in household structures and the evolving understanding of gender roles in domestic practices. Study participants were involved in either formal or informal relationships (predominantly heterosexual) or identified themselves as single. Their domestic practices reflected broader demographic and social trends recently observed in Poland, such as the decline in the number of large families, the decrease in the average number of people per household, the rise in single-person households, and the delayed departure of adult children from the family home (Krywult-Albańska, 2024; Pawelec, 2021; Matel, 2022; Buler & Pustułka, 2020).

A data corpus was developed through two independent research projects conducted by separate research teams:

1. The first study focused on analysing the phenomenon of the quality turn, understood as new attitudes and practices among individuals involved in food chains. Gender-related themes formed one of the analytical axes of the project. As part of this research, we conducted six targeted qualitative field studies in Poland, including food initiatives such as a Product Guarantee of Origin (PGO) scheme (interviews 1–12), a purchasing group (interviews 13–25), a box scheme and a kitchen incubator (interviews 26–39), allotment gardens (interviews 40–50), an open-air green market (interviews 51–64), and one of the largest Polish food cooperatives (interviews 65–75). Between 2020 and 2022, we conducted 75 semi-

structured, individual in-depth interviews addressing topics such as motivations, values, histories, activities, and perspectives related to food. The study included 34 women and 41 men. The analysis also drew on supplementary 28 in-depth interviews (interviews 76–104) conducted in local food initiatives as part of the team's previous research. A unique feature of this study was its focus on new food initiatives, resulting in an overrepresentation of middle-class respondents who were relatively better educated and had higher earnings.

2. The aim of the second project, carried out between 2019 and 2026, was to identify and analyse body-related practices in the daily lives of four generations of Polish men. The following topics were discussed: practices related to hygiene, physical activity, health, clothing, food preparation, nutrition, and the requirements for the male body. A total of 60 interviews were conducted in the project in 2022. In the sample there was a predominance of working interviewees with secondary education (15) and higher education (11). Most of them were city dwellers.

The data corpus was prepared based on interview transcripts (n=164). A general coding key, focused on gender, was developed and used to recode the interviews. Significant excerpts from the transcripts served as the basis for discussions of the research findings and for illustrating key gender-related dynamics. This procedure enabled the two research teams to combine their efforts, permitting joint interpretation of the data.

The quotes presented in this article are categorised according to participants' roles in relation to food (professionals involved in food production and commercial processing, as well as consumers) and declared gender (women and men, as defined in our study). We adopted a classic analytical model in which the quotes illustrate phenomena identified in the data. The interview transcripts are coded according to the following standard: project number (1–2), interview number (1R1–75), and declared gender.

## Research results

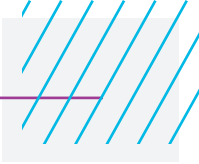
### *Guardians of the Hearth*

In the analysed material, gender-related categories proved to be most prominently reflected in the archetype of the female guardian of the hearth. For most respondents, the kitchen, as a physical space, and cooking practices were among the most significant frameworks defining the family. Central to this were the practices of home cooking, particularly for others. These practices were primarily women's domain in the study.

*I mean, I've always liked cooking. At home, we always cooked, and I've been doing it since I was a kid. My mom had to go away with my sister for an operation, so I had to start making meals (1R14, woman).*

This participant's statement illustrates a strong connection between cooking practices, responsibility for food, and femininity. An intergenerational transmission of practices, positions, and roles associated with gender is also evident. For most female respondents, femininity was inseparably tied to caring for the home, a private and family-oriented space. Cooking, grocery shopping, and food preparation were key everyday activities that constituted gender roles. This work was rarely perceived as an obligation, although this might be a feature of our research sample, which focused on active female consumers involved in food-related initiatives.

Despite the dynamics associated with modernity, our findings suggest that the positions, roles, and broader constructions of femininity, particularly in families, were deeply internalised and largely invisible to participants. The dominance of unpaid and 'invisible' domestic labour coexisted with the intergenerational transmission of roles. Women in Poland are socialised from a young age to assume responsibility for family meals. Study participants pointed to the continuity of practices passed down from grandmothers to mothers to daughters, who are taught the expectations associated with the role of women in the kitchen and dining room. Interviews are replete with references to the central role of the home, kitchen, and women, with the figure of the mother playing a pivotal role and her practices and approach regarded as essential to the well-being of the



entire family.

*And later, when I had my son and he started eating more than just my milk, I talked to our paediatrician, and she said I was feeding him wonderfully. She even said I could be a role model for other parents and hoped that my husband and I were also eating as well as our child (IR69, woman).*

Cooking, in this context, was seen neither as an aesthetic choice nor as a hobby. Instead, it presented a near-medical task, often reinforced by the authority of the paediatrician. Respondents described it as a woman's responsibility—caring for her child and feeding her husband. However, we believe this is an example of a feedback loop: while women shape the family's daily life, they are simultaneously shaped by it. They bear the burden of societal expectations in a context that remains largely patriarchal.

In meal preparation, shopping, and cooking, female participants responded to these gendered expectations. Notably, there was little space in their construction of femininity for pleasure or individuality. Women's accounts were dominated by rationality and a sense of responsibility. Women who cared for the hearth considered it their duty to be active and resourceful. This was reflected in the duality observed among most respondents: on the one hand, they held authority over how their families ate, but on the other, they were disproportionately burdened with food-related labour. Regardless of their engagement in other activities, including professional work, they assumed additional responsibilities associated with household food practices.

*Yesterday, I came home from work really late. And my husband just looked at me and said, 'You know, I've been eating only sandwiches for four days now—I need to eat something warm'. But when my son reaches for something like that (sweets), I hold my breath and think, 'Oh God, I hope he doesn't end up liking it too much' (IR69, woman).*

This quote illustrates the dynamics of gender roles and responsibilities associated with them. In many cases observed in our study, femininity was closely linked to feeding others. Particularly in the context of parenting, feeding became a practice imbued with both a sense of duty and concern for the family members' physical well-being, as well as anxieties related to modernity. Due to its dual physical and cultural significance, food uniquely amplifies the anxieties and values specific to a given society. In our study, gendered practices such as women's preparation of meals, including domestic, preferably homemade meals, represented labour that reinforced boundaries between the family and the perceived external world.

Interestingly, this amalgam of fear, labour for the benefit of others, and the protection of the family through food practices was, in our research, associated exclusively with femininity. In the narratives of men, particularly married men with children, we observed the opposite phenomenon—a withdrawal from the kitchen.

*I've got this flaw, you know. I never go digging through the pots myself to look for food. If my wife wasn't around, I just wouldn't eat until the evening (...). When the kids came along, of course, they kind of shaped our diet because, at first, you cook for them, and then you start paying attention to making things healthy. So, by extension, parents end up eating healthier, too (2R1, man).*

*My wife does the cooking. I mean, maybe I've taken on too much with other tasks, and that's just how it is. It's not even an agreement or anything. It just happened that I rarely get involved in cooking nowadays. But when I have time, it's not a problem (2R1, man).*

Most men in our study displayed a degree of ambivalence in their narratives. On the one hand, they viewed the family kitchen as a woman's domain, while the language they used often reflected the undervaluation of this activity. Men seemed to withdraw from or even delegate cooking-related tasks to women. At the same time, their accounts revealed a degree of hesitation, acknowledging their potential role and the need to support women. This ambivalence suggests the influence of emerging behavioural patterns that are challenging the traditionally gendered practices related to food.

A notable divide in the data further supports this interpretation. Younger men, particularly those living in large cities and without children, spoke about food in distinctly different ways. They were more likely to highlight

their involvement and the actual sharing of domestic responsibilities with their partners. Additionally, their narratives addressed other dimensions of food, such as taste, the political nature of consumer choices, and professional or business-related activities. One participant described her partner's engagement as follows:

*It's usually more of a help. When I look at Jakub, he really loves cooking and knows how to do it—though lately, his sense of taste has been a bit off. But he genuinely enjoys it, and he's really good at it. We even have this idea of opening a restaurant together: I'd handle the baking, and he'd do the cooking. Maybe that's why men often become chefs—they're more task-oriented (1R52, woman).*

In this context, men's cooking was often less focused on the family and served more as an expression of, or a precursor to, social, political, or economic activity. These constructed meanings and practices tend to reinforce existing gender inequalities, regardless of the political orientation of a particular initiative or participant's beliefs. We observed these dynamics in various contexts: the traditional kitchens and dining rooms of conservative urban participants, suburban vegetable garden owners, and in the rented apartments of young intellectuals and freelancers. Men's withdrawal from the kitchen was closely linked to a clear, gendered division of tasks and responsibilities within the family, particularly pronounced after the arrival of children, further solidifying the roles of partners as mothers and fathers. In most cases, when men were present in the kitchen, their involvement typically focused on technical or functional aspects of food preparation rather than routine domestic labour.

*It never even crossed my mind to interfere with how the kitchen should look. That's my wife's kingdom—she designed it and arranged everything the way she wanted. The only thing that's my contribution is that, at the last minute, I suggested we shouldn't put the oven under the cooktop (1R20, man).*

Men, particularly those in heterosexual marriages, were often responsible for smokehouses, programming kitchen appliances, and managing the technical infrastructure of the kitchen. Pronounced processes of doing gender in culinary practices appear to be closely linked to the construction of household relationships. These processes rarely involved explicitly articulated conflicts or tensions. The dominance of women in kitchens, dining rooms, and gardens—or more broadly, in the family's daily life—was perceived as normal, giving women a semblance of authority over domestic affairs. In this model, the enactment of gender was associated with the expansion of roles and practices related to femininity, while masculinity was gradually relegated to the periphery of domestic practices.

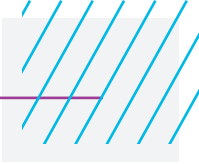
A second type of dominance emerged as a form of oppression, wherein kitchen roles were imposed on women, often accompanied by the rhetoric that framed them as the 'queens of the kitchen'.

*I don't eat meat because if I'm not the one preparing meals, my grandma makes dishes that can be adjusted—she adds meat for herself, and I just eat them without the meat (2R49, man).*

In this statement, a young man, a progressive vegetarian, described how the women in his family carefully adapted meals for him. As always, this narrative has two sides: on the one hand, it illustrates the care characteristic of intergenerational family relationships; on the other, it highlights the enduring construction of gender roles and the processes of doing gender. The process of pushing women into the kitchen intensified with the arrival of children or grandchildren in the family, along with the conscious adoption of the role of caregiver and provider. In return, women received the seldom-fulfilled promise of agency and recognition for their work. Regardless of how we assess this phenomenon, the processes of doing gender in the context of household and family care, particularly in relation to children, remain clearly visible, with firmly defined boundaries between genders.

The research also reveals deviations and shifts in the dynamics of doing gender in meal preparation, most evident among young couples without children or in situations involving tensions.

*When I started working a full-time job two years ago, it changed our lives a bit because I stopped being so focused on the household—my work hours were no longer flexible. And after about six months, I realised, well, now I'm also working full-time, so if I work, you cook. My husband had to learn how to cook. There's a*



*lot of cooking to be done because, in the morning, I still prepare food—I do it because I'm fast—so I make breakfast for the three of us and prepare four meals for our son to take to preschool (IR51, woman).*

This quote illustrates an attempt at undoing gender. What stands out is the effort both partners had to invest in this process. The description contrasts sharply with the 'natural', frictionless narratives of other participants, whose households maintained the traditional division of male and female roles. At the same time, the transformation remains incomplete. The woman still bears responsibility for the family's breakfasts and preparing food for the child.

To summarise this section, despite processes of emancipation, industrialisation, and the advent of new technologies that somewhat reduce the physical burden of daily domestic chores, responsibility for the domestic hearth remains predominantly a woman's domain. Modern Vestals often have increasing responsibilities as they balance professional activities with the primary task of preparing food, which directly impacts the health and well-being of their families. This model has two intertwined dimensions: a positive one—the home as a place that fosters bonds and shapes the family in many ways—and a negative one, associated with coercion and the symbolic violence of women's 'duties'. A common thread across households is the focus on controlling femininity while allowing the absence of masculinity in family food practices. Whether the motivation stems from fear of modernity, progressive values, or a traditional family model, communal, family-oriented culinary practices continue to strongly define the positions, behaviours, and expectations associated with gender.

### *Healers and Body Engineers*

Health is another significant aspect of analysing how food-related practices shape the socially and culturally constructed notion of gender. Firstly, women's activities aimed at promoting health and physical well-being complement their roles in food-related tasks and family care. Through eating, we influence our bodies, regulate their functions, and navigate the boundary between the external world and the individual. We also engage in a social game. What we consume and how it affects us shapes our relationships with others and determines our position in the social hierarchy. These dynamics render food both a potential threat to the body and a means of controlling, regulating, or even healing it through practices such as dieting or specific preparation methods. Our analysis indicates that one of the most significant dynamics linking health, food, and gender is the extension of women's labour related to the family's functioning. Concern for health, along with protection against real or imagined illnesses, belongs to the sphere of what is ultimately provided to our bodies in the form of broadly understood food. These actions are inherently socialised and directed towards others: children, husbands, friends, and acquaintances.

*My passion for ecology began with my husband's illness. His health needs prompted me to start looking into how to cook, and what not to eat, and later, I just kept improving my knowledge professionally and became more involved (IR29, woman).*

Our respondent's actions—her development and work—focused on supporting her husband through dietary practices. She perceived this as a continuation of generational heritage, as her mother behaved similarly. This woman interpreted her efforts as a duty, a noble obligation to prioritise the well-being of others, even at the expense of her professional aspirations.

*Sometimes I grew weary of it. Work used to be very important to me. But when I had my child? It suddenly seemed less significant. I gave up my business and felt indifferent about it. My child is more important, his health. So, I stepped away from it—I don't want to be a graphic designer anymore (IR24, woman).*

Interestingly, while tending to the hearth often appeared optional, in the context of health, women's domestic activity was perceived almost as an obligation. Contemporary dietary discourses—mediated through experts, websites, apps, and media—strongly medicalise food and the practices surrounding it. This adds yet another layer of labour assigned to women in the family: acquiring knowledge about health and nutrition. This is hardly a straightforward process—it requires navigating contradictory and constantly evolving dietary advice communicated through magazines, manuals, social media, product packaging, and even the interactive screens

of kitchen appliances.

Since health occupies a key position in the hierarchy of values among Poles, taking care of it is often accompanied by tensions and conflicts. In our study, these frictions frequently emerged between different generations of women in the same family.

*When my first grandson was born, I started observing how his mother fed him. When I saw what she was feeding him, it was shocking. Witnessing my daughter-in-law feeding my grandchildren things like Monte and those Gerber soups—it was horrifying (IR100, woman).*

The conflict between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law over feeding the family essentially represents a deeper contest of roles and an attempt to establish a hierarchy among women focused on family well-being and food. The figure of the grandson is particularly interesting here; his arrival opened up the nuclear family to intergenerational dynamics and the disputes that accompany them. The woman's choices as a mother were no longer limited to herself. A practice crucial to the processes of doing gender became more heavily scrutinised by close family members, particularly other women. Importantly, this process does not end with children growing up.

*Initially, there was defensiveness and reluctance, even aggression. You know how it is in a mother-daughter relationship—like I'm trying to impose something on her. But when things got really bad—her face covered in acne, all swollen—she started following my practices. Now, she even brags about it when we talk, since she's living in Warsaw now, saying she has a much better awareness of nutrition. You can see it in her; she's slimmed down (IR100, woman).*

The strong connection between health and food enables the interplay of different visions of femininity. This continues to occur despite the dominance of the nuclear family model, in which seniors typically do not live with younger generations.

The frameworks that defined femininity became particularly rigid during critical family situations, such as the birth of children or grandchildren, the ageing of parents, or illness. What stood out in participants' accounts was the explicitly socialised model of femininity. Women's cooking was primarily associated with labour performed for the benefit of others. The vectors of this process could, however, also turn inward, leading women to conform to family expectations and creating a hermetic, closed model of femininity centred on domestic care.

In contrast, some participants experienced a more inclusive model of femininity, in which sociability played a key role:

*For example, I have both inhaled and food allergies, and they intersect. I had two shocks, but I managed to get through them, and it turned out that homegrown tomatoes and strawberries don't harm me. That's how I started making various things for myself. And then I began sharing them with others, giving them as gifts to friends (IR15, woman).*

The practices of healthy cooking, gardening, and collective shopping aimed at obtaining food defined by respondents as healthy carried the potential for building relationships and social connections. This was particularly evident in the study of individuals involved in alternative food networks, such as purchasing groups or cooperatives. These networks were dominated by active female consumers who organised cooperatives, purchasing groups, and informal networks. What often began as an individual search for food could bring together a group of active women. In some cases, this evolved into an institutionalised group engaging in activities extending beyond food. These collective efforts included workshops, meetings, and the sharing of knowledge and labour. The interviewed women were sometimes able to build alternative social networks around food, complementing their activities focused on partners and children.

The relationship among health, gender, and food proved not to be limited to the family. Another prominent



dynamic observed in the study, connecting both women and men, was related to caring for their bodies. In the narratives of some participants, themes emerged around managing illness, addressing physical and mental health challenges, and pursuing balance through food-related practices.

*Two years ago, I started seeing a traditional Chinese medicine doctor, a woman from Wrocław (...). Now, I'm able to look at someone and roughly tell how they eat. You can see it all in their skin, in their face. Especially in people over 40—you can see the changes; they're visible (1R52, woman).*

Food was often perceived as a tool for controlling and regulating one's body. Regardless of a diet's physical effects, it provided respondents with a sense of agency and control, helping to reduce tensions, such as those associated, for example, with ageing. Such narratives appeared among both women and men, whose strategies for addressing personal challenges frequently relied on individual actions connected to food and bodily regulation. Men's narratives related to health and food exhibit a dual character. In the first type, the differences between femininity and masculinity became blurred, reflecting elements of the deconstruction—or undoing—of traditional gender roles.

*I think there were some health crises at that younger age; when you want to have energy, you don't, because you're always sick. I think that's when I started looking for methods that could help me (...). When we went to these drumming retreats, there was no meat there; so it made it easier to switch to a different diet (1R55, man).*

This excerpt comes from an interview with a young man, a participant in a large city's food cooperative. Being in a heteronormative relationship and without children, both he and his partner focused on the relationship between the body and food. In his account, the boundaries between masculinity and femininity were blurred, with no clearly defined divisions of practices. In their romantic relationship, they engaged in similar activities, attended the same workshops and followed the same diets. This process was highly individualised, centred on the body, and characterised by a limited social reach.

However, this was neither the sole nor the dominant narrative regarding health and masculinity observed in the study. Among male participants, practices and narratives more frequently emphasised increasing efficiency and systematically training the body.

*Yeah, definitely, like I mentioned, I do sports, I run marathons, so if I eat something like, you know, ready-made dumplings, I really feel it afterwards. But if I make something myself, I know, for example, how much of a certain nutrient it contains, and then I can eat it without feeling heavy afterwards. It really has a big impact (2R17, man).*

The relationship between culinary practices and the embodied individual assumed a more mechanistic character for some men in our study. Meals were understood primarily as a means of supplying calories and macro- and micronutrients that enhanced bodily efficiency and performance. For a significant proportion of male participants, the processes of doing masculinity were closely tied to individual agency, a sense of control, physical fitness, and bodily energy.

*I ate everything. I always had a great metabolism, so I could eat a lot. I was never interested in vegetarianism; for me, food was always just a source of energy, something I needed to consume to function (2R27, man).*

Echoes of this mechanistic approach to food, treated as fuel for the male body, emerged in interviews with respondents, regardless of their worldviews or dietary preferences. Particularly revealing were interviews with vegetarians and vegans. Despite the specificity of their diets and the political motivations underlying their food choices, their narratives also reflected an engineering-like rationality, with a strong emphasis on the perceived positive effects of a meat-free diet on the body.

*When I fully switched to vegetarianism, I was completely immersed in all this information about animals and, let's say, the advantages of a plant-based diet over a meat-based one. Honestly, I don't know if I convinced myself a little that I felt particularly better. But for sure, I had more energy, definitely, and most importantly, my face looked more alive (2R55, man).*

While these narratives frequently invoked arguments referencing ethics, politics, the climate crisis, or animal welfare, at the core of the values held by most vegan or vegetarian respondents was the belief that such diets served as effective fuel for the body. In this sense, vegetarianism and veganism did not so much challenge but rather aligned with mechanisms that reinforced traditionally understood forms of masculinity.

In contrast to the subsection on taking care of the domestic hearth, the analysis of gender, food, and broadly understood health provides deeper insights into the construction of masculinity. A shared element among men and women in the study is the reflection on bodily experience and the attempt to control it through food-related practices. These processes tend to be reductive, focusing on diets, fasting, and restriction rather than abundance. Although the dynamics shaping male and female bodies may appear distinct, they are in fact deeply embedded in culturally conditioned discourses surrounding the body, associated anxieties, and socially reinforced expectations. Late-modern concerns manifest, for example, in efforts to maintain the efficiency of ageing bodies.

### *Masterchef: Pleasure and Taste*

Our research identified one area where shifts in the practices of doing gender occurred, with women stepping back from the forefront of domestic cooking. The narratives and practices of female participants largely omitted references to taste and sensory experiences, as their focus on others overshadowed the pleasure derived from food consumption. In contrast, male respondents noted this absence. In some interviews, they articulated stereotypical beliefs about the superiority of male sensory perception as a way of explaining or justifying this difference.

*Yes, it's clear that women are the ones organising food, and that's just normal. When it comes to shopping, it's women, but in terms of culinary skills, they just can't beat men. The top chefs in the best restaurants are men. Why? The answer is simple—men have better-developed taste buds (1R20, man).*

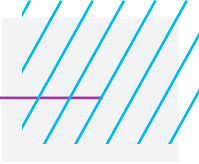
This phenomenon is well recognised and critically discussed in the literature (Hryciuk, 2019; Vester, 2015; Crowther, 2013). Male chefs often replace women who are burdened with the responsibilities of daily cooking. Women's tastes are overshadowed or supplanted by men's. For some respondents, particularly those in marital relationships and/or with children, men's cooking proved to be occasional, celebratory, or related to professional work. The significance of this pattern extended beyond culinary habits, intersecting with broader constructions of gender, emotions, and behaviour. In our interviews, men more frequently highlighted the role of spontaneity, whims, and impulses in their culinary choices and activities. In this sense, the social doing of masculinity appears to be associated with greater freedom of choice, flexibility in action, and the pursuit of pleasure.

*It has to have flavour. For me, good food has to taste good—I need to feel like eating it and have an appetite for it. I go by what my body needs. Not by what's available, but by what I feel like eating (2R3, man).*

Taste, as a sense, has a unique character. As Jukka Gronow (1997) points out, it is inherently social. Taste situates us on the class ladder of social hierarchies, can serve as a political statement, and is closely linked to forms of cultural and aesthetic expression. Through trends, it enables us to build relationships with others who share similar tastes. Interestingly, references to taste appeared predominantly in men's narratives, as if suggesting that such dimensions are more strongly present in the social processes of constructing masculinity. In other words, taste becomes one of the tools through which the men we studied positioned themselves vis-à-vis others and constructed their identity (Maciel, 2017). Regardless of their diet, male respondents referred to pleasure more frequently when discussing their food choices. Whether cooking themselves or relying on the work of others, they sought flavours they enjoyed. In some cases, male tastes were constructed in opposition to others, often invoking a search for uniqueness and new flavours:

*I generally like trying new things. Polish cuisine has become so overdone that it doesn't excite me the way it used to (2R60, man).*

Alternatively, references to traditional flavour profiles were used to reinforce established culinary identities:



*I don't eat or care much for so-called healthy food. I'm a fan of good food. I'm a proponent of our cuisine, Polish cuisine, which isn't healthy—it's heavy, fatty, spicy, but delicious (1R99, man).*

Although these two quotes appear to refer to diverse traditions and bodily constructs, they share a common core. Whether describing a consumer seeking novelty and innovation or one with more conservative tastes, the key themes are pleasure, agency, and the positioning of oneself and one's body—either in alignment with or in contrast to dominant traditions. In this sense, masculinity is constructed not only in gyms but also in restaurants and pubs. Masculinity and food intertwine through pleasure and the symbolic dimensions of the feast, often linked to exploration, culinary tourism, and elitist forms of consumption.

A clear divide emerges among participants. For some men, traditional European cultural symbols—meat, heavy food, and alcohol—proved crucial. These respondents reconstructed the traditions of peasant, flour-based cuisine from Central and Eastern Europe, opting for an aristocratic simulation of it, characterised by red meats, rich sauces, and strong alcohol. Masculinity lay at the heart of these dynamics and was associated with dominance and excessive consumption. At the other end of the spectrum were men who prioritised experimentation, rejecting tradition in favour of exploration and emphasising individuality. They represented the masculinity of explorers—those seeking and venturing into new territories, equipped with the financial and cultural resources to discover new domains. Yet, it remained a distinctly male taste. The senses, the body, and individual preferences were central to these practices.

Notably, in more than 100 interviews, themes of pleasure, the search for new flavours, and culinary innovation appeared predominantly in men's narratives. Women's accounts, even when discussing travel and enjoyable culinary experiences, were more focused on bodily regulation and control, for example, through references to therapeutic trips or opportunities to acquire new knowledge for use in the home kitchen. For men, however, consumption and occasional cooking practices seemed to hold greater significance as symbols of their relationship with tradition, modernity, and current trends. These practices also served as a means of expressing political views. Male culinary expressions might align with a nationalistic, patriotic model of masculinity or stand in cosmopolitan opposition to it, emphasising diversity. In contrast to women's practices, men's food-related activities tended to be more extroverted. Aesthetic considerations, the pursuit of pleasure, dining out, and the symbolic significance of feasting served as ways to assert individuality and social status. To conclude this subsection, for some men in our study, cooking is largely an incidental activity. In contrast, consumption and investment in the technological infrastructure of kitchen processes can serve as tools for class-based positioning in relation to others. Food, as an inherently relational and symbolic domain, demands such positioning and is saturated with power dynamics (Mol, 2021; Maciel, 2017). For women in relationships, this power is often informal, manifesting as control over the household and the bodies of partners and children. In contrast, masculinity is expressed more performatively through food, frequently aligning with a traditionally sociological or idle-consumption role. Food also serves as a statement—an assertion of class status or of traditional versus progressive ideologies. Whereas femininity is primarily constructed through the domestic preparation of food, masculinity appears to be more strongly shaped through taste and pleasure.

## Summary and Discussion

The question posed in this article concerns how food preparation practices in households are perceived by women and men in relation to cultural expectations and gender stereotypes, and whether these practices reflect a shift in roles or introduce new elements into the cultural notions of femininity and masculinity. Our findings suggest that participants largely adhere to traditional role divisions. This is evident in the persistent positioning of women as nurturers and healers, responsible for safeguarding the hearth. Similarly, the retreat of men from this domain and the framing of it as the sole purview of women aligns with traditional role expectations. At the same time, men tend to differentiate themselves by asserting their position as connoisseurs of 'taste', frequently gravitating towards more specialised, 'niche', or technical aspects of food preparation as a means of marking their distinct role.

In our analysis of gender roles in the kitchen, women emerge as Vestals, priestesses guarding the hearth. They bear the primary responsibility for preparing meals for family members, reinforcing traditional gender norms (DeVault, 1991). Cooking for others, alongside embodying the figure of the nurturing mother, remains a significant reference point in the process of doing femininity (Vester, 2015). Most women interviewed in the two studies accept this responsibility unprotestingly, while attempts to renegotiate roles typically occur among younger generations (for example, through the sharing of household duties or increased male participation in meal preparation when women are engaged in professional work). Respondents' statements indicate that when gender roles become more fluid, both partners must invest considerable effort in establishing and maintaining a new domestic order.

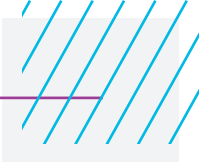
Female participants feel responsible not only for preparing and distributing food among family members but also for managing their health, often at the expense of their own ambitions, needs, or even physical well-being. By providing home-cooked meals, they visualise themselves as shielding their families from the outside world. This observation is consistent with Mroczkowska's findings regarding Polish women, which highlight the expectation that it is the role of the 'housewife' to ensure family health by feeding them homemade food (Mroczkowska, 2014).

Industrialised food, frequently described by respondents as 'unhealthy' or filled with preservatives they termed 'chemicals', is contrasted with 'homemade food', prepared or produced within the household. Importantly, this phenomenon is not limited to countries with strong traditional gender roles. Comparable patterns have been identified in studies from the Global North, where maternal responsibility is closely linked to practices such as preparing children's lunchboxes (Watson-Mackie & McKenzie, 2023; Harman & Cappellini, 2015). The seemingly neutral practice of meal preparation ties together official discourses on healthy eating, media-driven dietary narratives, the sense of duty associated with the maternal role, and women's daily kitchen activities and food choices. Hence, the central figure of the Vestal is key to this article.

In contrast, the figure of the Masterchef emerges for men—an expert associated with taste, culinary skill, and pleasure. Women's everyday work in preparing food tends to be taken for granted, while men's involvement in the same domain is perceived as exceptional. Men are neither held to similar expectations nor required to meet them, and when they do cook for the family, they are often rewarded with special recognition (Counihan, 2012; Julier, 2013:150).

The narrative of cooking as a 'masculine art' may be interpreted as a male attempt to assert independence—not only from women but also in response to broader socio-cultural phenomena that 'soften' the male body. Since the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, models of masculinity have undergone significant transformations, with men increasingly confronted not only by the feminisation of culture but also by the steadily diminishing availability of traditional arenas for expressing masculinity, individuality, independence, and competition. Although men are frequently presented as culinary experts, this expertise is largely located outside the low-prestige domestic sphere, for example in the figure of professional chefs (Counihan, 2012:104; Sumpter, 2015). In everyday practices, men assert their position by emphasising their superiority in matters of flavour. Taste serves as one of the tools they use to position themselves vis-à-vis others and construct their identities, with food-related practices functioning as markers of social status. Notably, in our study, only male participants made references to the pleasure derived from eating; this theme was entirely absent from women's narratives. On the one hand, the fact that women are responsible for the daily feeding of others, while men are granted the freedom to 'explore' flavours and enjoy greater liberty in culinary practices (Hollows, 2003), perpetuates inequalities. On the other hand, it raises the question of whether men are actively carving out a distinct niche within food-related practices—one that differentiates them from areas traditionally associated with women (Adler, 1981; Szabo, 2014).

Both women and men display an awareness of their bodies and attempt to regulate them through food-related practices. Food is conceptualised as a tool for bodily regulation, particularly in the context of illness. In



this respect, strategies of self-care—such as adopting specific diets—appear similar across genders, suggesting a partial blurring of gender distinctions. However, for women, caring for their bodies is closely intertwined with the responsibility for the well-being of other family members. Women's narratives often reflect a holistic vision of health, placing the individual in a broader relational context. Their responsibilities extend beyond their own well-being to encompass the care of family members and the maintenance of social bonds through food-centred practices.

Perhaps the most striking finding of our study is how unsurprising the processes related to gender, food, and the household prove to be. In analysing the persistence of gender roles associated with these phenomena, we propose two hypotheses that require further verification. The first suggests that Polish society retains a strongly conservative character, reflected in enduring gendered divisions of food-related practices. From this perspective, the observed patterns may indicate the persistence of familialistic social arrangements, characterised by a strong orientation towards the family household and a model in which men remain the primary income earners (Oláh et al., 2018; Bachórz, 2018).

The second hypothesis questions whether the dynamic nature of gender construction processes may be overestimated in the social sciences. It raises the possibility that the assumed pursuit of the equal division of domestic responsibilities between genders is, to a certain extent, overstated. Research conducted in Poland, as well as cross-national comparisons, indicates that although men's involvement in domestic duties has increased in recent decades, significant inequalities persist (Baszczak et al., 2025:15; Altintas & Sullivan, 2016; ISSP Report, 2022). As Ross-Plourde and Lachance-Grzela observe, 'these societal changes may not represent a complete reversal of gender roles as the term "revolution" would suggest, but rather the evolution of such roles, which has been rapid in its early stages and has now slowed considerably' (Ross-Plourde & Lachance-Grzela, 2025; Altintas & Sullivan, 2016).

Importantly, this phenomenon is not limited to societies with strongly traditional gender roles. Studies from the Global North demonstrate similar patterns, particularly in the association between motherhood and preparing children's packed lunches (Watson-Mackie & McKenzie, 2023; Harman & Cappellini, 2015). On the one hand, contemporary societies are characterised by processes that blur gender categories, which no longer fit neatly into binary oppositions (Nielsen, 2017). On the other hand, a growing body of research highlights the enduring nature of certain gender divisions, particularly those at the heart of family relationships (Storz, 2022). Even in societies with less traditional models, gendered divisions of labour, at least in heterosexual households, remain strong, and even new processes linked to greater female labour force participation do not alter the overall dynamics of gender construction (Jurczyk et al., 2019). What is striking here is the convergence of narratives and recurring arguments concerning gender divisions and assigned roles in developed societies, including those adopting different models of family development (O'Connell & Brannen, 2016).

At the same time, gender in the kitchen cannot be understood as an entirely fixed concept. In the traditional division of roles, certain 'cracks'—attempts to challenge the established norms—are also evident. These include women's efforts to negotiate a more equal division of household responsibilities, particularly among those balancing domestic duties with professional work, and in encouraging men to participate in meal preparation. Similarly, a less rigid approach to the division of domestic labour is noticeable among younger participants. Further indications of change include some men's willingness to challenge the stereotype of the meat-eating male, alongside women's increasing engagement in activities extending beyond the domestic sphere, such as participation in food cooperatives and other community-based initiatives.

Nevertheless, at the fundamental level, Kurt Lewin's (1947) observation regarding women's role as gatekeepers of the family household remains relevant. Gender-making processes appear to remain strong, at least in our kitchens, dining rooms, and shopping habits.

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