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## **Reconceptualising power and gendered subjectivities in domestic cooking spaces**

Dr Angela Meah

Department of Geography  
University of Sheffield  
Sheffield, UK  
S10 2TU  
[a.meah@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:a.meah@sheffield.ac.uk)

# Reconceptualising power and gendered subjectivities in domestic cooking spaces

Dr Angela Meah, University of Sheffield

## Abstract

Drawing on evidence from the Global North and South, this paper explores the power dynamics of domestic kitchens in different geographical contexts. Noting the gendered nature of domesticity, it contrasts those perspectives which regard women's primary responsibility for foodwork as inherently oppressive, with others which see kitchens and associated domestic spaces as sites of potential empowerment for women. The paper explores the complex, spatially-distributed, character of power surrounding domestic foodwork, decentring Anglo-American understandings of the relationship between gender, power and domestic space by foregrounding the experiences of a range of women from across the globe. The paper also examines the increasing role of men in domestic settings, particularly in the Global North, assessing the extent to which their engagement in cooking and other domestic practices may be challenging conventional understandings of the relationship between gender, power and space. Focusing on the spatial dynamics of the domestic kitchen, this paper advances a more nuanced understanding of the co-constitutive nature of the relationship between gender and power including the instabilities and slippages that occur in the performance of various domestic tasks. The paper advocates future research on the boundaries of home, work and leisure, focusing on their significance in the constitution and transformation of male and female subjectivities.

## Keywords

gender; power; space; domestic kitchens; foodwork; global

## I. Introduction

British designer, Terence Conran, has suggested that the 'kitchen mirrors more effectively than any other room in the house the great social changes that have taken place in the last hundred years' (1977: 1). In the Global North, kitchens have evolved over this period: rather than being the exclusive domain of working class women relegated to the rear of the house beyond public view - either in their own kitchens or in those where they were employed as cooks and maids - the modern kitchen is increasingly represented as a place of sociality where material objects, such as cookers, food processors and other specialist gadgets are consumed both for what they make possible and for the role they play in actively configuring their users (Shove et al., 2007). But the apparent 'transformation' of the kitchen from a site in which 'sanitary labour' (Saarikangas, 2006) is

undertaken into either a 'pleasure palace' (Inness, 2001: 125), or a space occupied by both male and female users of different social classes, has not been unproblematic. Indeed, there has been much scholarly attention concerning the alienating impact - on women - of industrialisation in the domestic domain (Cowan 1983) and, relatedly, the normative association of particular domestic activities as 'women's work'. Foodwork is one such complex of practices, here understood as referring to all the tasks associated with planning, purchasing, storing, cooking and preparing food, as well as related tasks such as washing up and clearing away. Moreover, since foodwork is not generally regarded as contributing to the productive economy in households in the Global North, women's domestic engagement with food has often been regarded as taken-for-granted, lacking in value, socially derided or downright oppressive (see for example Charles and Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1991; Giard, 1998). However, this is but a partial view of women's complex relationships with kitchen spaces. While feminists have, undoubtedly, had grounds for criticism regarding domestic distributions of labour, women's relationship to, and perceptions of, foodwork cannot be fully understood if viewed exclusively via the optic of a particular constituency of women in the Global North. Nor should it be argued that women's - and men's - relationships to the kitchen, and related spaces in which responsibilities concerning food are distributed, have remained immutable since Second Wave Feminists first spoke out against the position of 'captive wives' and 'housebound mothers' (Gavron, 1966). In this paper I draw upon scholarship from a range of disciplines in re-evaluating those discourses which emphasise the oppressive character of foodwork as drudgery, as well as those which have facilitated a more nuanced understanding of the geographies of domestic power which reconfigure the kitchen as a site of liberation rather than oppression.

My aim in this paper is to illustrate the complexities of the gendered, spatially-distributed, character of power surrounding domestic foodwork. I do so, initially, by decentring Anglo-American understandings of the relationship between gender, power and domestic kitchens and by foregrounding the diverse experiences of a range of women in the Global South, as well as minority and migrant women elsewhere, for whom the activities surrounding the growth, acquisition, preparation and distribution of food in the domestic context have presented opportunities to demonstrate creativity and skill, as well as to accrue value within their families and communities, and even to provide opportunities to express resistance and empowerment within personal and structural relations. Responding to the gender-bias that has tended to characterise much academic scholarship concerning food, I also look at the experiences of men in those spaces where they have been assumed to be absent. Indeed, following developments which have seen cooking recast as a 'leisure' activity in parts of the Global North including in North America, Europe and Australasia, I examine how this shift has opened a door through which an increasing number of men have stepped to take their place at the stove'. I then draw some speculative conclusions about the impact of this shift in either troubling how the relationship between gender and power can be understood, or in recasting the kitchen as a contested space for women and men. In presenting a more nuanced, culturally and geographically inclusive picture, decentring those largely Anglo-American feminist perspectives that are premised upon shared experiences of domestic oppression, this paper contributes to a revisionist history of foodwork and, indeed, of the kitchen. However, before exploring the literature concerning domestic foodwork and related distributions of responsibilities, it is important to ground these discussions by examining the concept of 'power' and how this has been conceptualised both in relation to gender and to space.

## II. Power, gender, space

Conceptually, power conventionally conjures up associations of dominance and control, invoking ideas of hegemony and resistance. Configured in this way, power is perceived as something exercised 'over', typically observed via a top/down dynamic. Taking a Foucauldian perspective, however, geographer John Allen (2004: 19) suggests a more 'spatially curious' approach which 'foregrounds associational as well as instrumental forms of power'. Rather than conceptualising it as aggregated from a central point, Allen draws upon Foucault's argument that, since power is to be found everywhere, its sources are therefore diffuse. Instead of thinking of it in binary terms, Allen suggests that the modalities of power are constituted differently in space and time via a multitude of everyday practices, giving it an amorphous quality (2004: 20).

Taking a less rigid approach in understanding the distribution of power resonates with scholarship on gender which has suggested that power is not something that is either experienced or practiced by *all* women or *all* men in the same way, with 'femininity' and 'masculinity' existing in binary relation (Connell, 1987). Feminist geographers (among others) have contributed to developing a more nuanced understanding of the operationalization of power in the different spaces occupied by women and men – such as work, home and leisure - highlighting the slippage which may occur between feminine and masculine subjectivities as individuals move between these spaces<sup>i</sup>. Indeed, as Rose (1990: 395) has pointed out, 'the discursive meaning of places and spaces is central to configurations of power', elsewhere reminding us that 'not even sexed difference should be taken for granted' since subjectivities are spatially embodied (1995: 546). Scholarship undertaken by feminist geographers has, importantly, thrown into relief questions about the relationship between notions of woman/man and femininity/masculinity. For example, Linda McDowell's (1997) work on City of London bankers pertinently challenges the codification of certain types of jobs as exclusively 'masculine' preserves with little or no movement between the different spaces occupied by men and women and related identities required therein. Importantly, McDowell's analysis draws upon Judith Butler's (1990; 1993) theorisation of gender as embodied performance, making possible transgressive and spatially specific performances. Developing Butler's arguments further, Gregson and Rose (2000: 441) make the case that 'it is not only social actors that are produced by power, but the spaces in which they perform' suggesting that 'we need to think of spaces too as performative of power relations'. Highlighting the subtleties which exist in the relationship between power, performance and differing spatialised subjectivities, Gregson and Rose move on from understandings (like Goffman's (1959)) which emphasise active, conscious performance, and those offered by Butler's more discursive approach. They suggest, instead, that the instability and slippage evident between performances and the spaces in which these take place point toward the potential for both subversion and disruption, as well as highlighting a much more complex and messy relationship between power, different spaces and the (gendered) performance(s) which take place therein. For Gregson and Rose (2000: 442-43), the emphasis is on exploring the relationality<sup>ii</sup> of performance and how the blurring of clear distinctions between positions and spaces is a source of performative instability. This way of rethinking the relationship between gender, power and space is, I would suggest, a useful conceptual tool for re-examining the gendered spatial dynamics of the domestic kitchen and the blurring of its boundaries with other – seemingly unrelated – spaces.

### III. Historically locating kitchens in the Global North

Within public imaginaries, the kitchen is often associated as the domestic space in which ‘home’ is most strongly located but, rather than reflecting a neatly demarcated boundary between public and private, as Alison Blunt (2005: 510) has pointed out, ‘the home itself is intensely political, both in its internal intimacies and through its interfaces with the wider world’. Indeed, the home has emerged as a space in which gendered relations are both lived out and relentlessly reinforced (Chapman, 1999), producing and reproducing gender-based subjectivities which contribute to processes of identification among women and men, consequently often rendering home a contested space (Munro and Madigan, 1999; Blunt and Dowling, 2006). It is perhaps no surprise that, during the 1960s and 1970s, Anglo-American feminists drew attention to the position of ‘captive wives’ and ‘housebound mothers’ (Gavron, 1966) encumbered with the endless responsibilities of housework, who were fixed – both structurally and ideologically – by a ‘dominant value system of modern industrialised societies’ which attaches greater significance to masculine rather than feminine roles (Oakley, 1985: 2). Indeed, many saw housework as counter-productive to the possibility of women achieving self-actualisation (De Beauvoir, 1949; Friedan, 1963; Oakley 1974). Germaine Greer (1970: 328) likened housework to slavery, while - in *The Feminine Mystique* - Betty Friedan denounced ‘femininity’ as resulting in women’s loss of identity which transformed them into ‘an anonymous biological robot in a docile mass’ (1963: 296). Although cooking was perhaps regarded as potentially the most enjoyable of domestic responsibilities since it has greatest creative potential, among Oakley’s 40 London housewives, “‘Thinking what to eat’ is an endless duty, however creative the actual task may be’ (1985: 59), an observation also made more recently in the UK by Frances Short (2006). While it may be easy to dismiss these complaints by pointing out how domestic technologies have improved the conditions of women relative to their predecessors, some have argued that such technologies have both produced and reinforced women’s gendered identities in relation to food. Reflecting on the introduction of stoves in the nineteenth century, Ruth Schwartz Cowan (1983: 53-62) argues that while this technology may be regarded as a ‘labour-saving’ device, the labour it saved was actually *male* since it simultaneously eliminated the need for men to gather fuel, required greater knowledge and skill to accomplish more complex cooking (see also Silva 2000) which - relatedly – was more time consuming, and required daily cleaning, a responsibility undertaken exclusively by women. Little wonder, then, that domestic foodwork has come to be regarded, by some feminists, with scorn, leading to campaigns by feminist utopians for ‘kitchenless’ houses, characterised by the ‘socialisation of domestic work’, as early as the mid-nineteenth century<sup>iii</sup> (Hayden, 1978: 275).

While Second Wave feminists undoubtedly played an important role in problematizing naturalised assumptions concerning women, femininity and domestic roles (McDowell, 2002), these have not been without critique within more recent feminist scholarship. Indeed, Friedan has been accused of ignoring the complexity of the era, both presenting women as passive victims and ignoring how they may have transformed and resisted dominant forms of femininity (Meyerowitz, 1994). Importantly, it has been argued that Friedan constructed femininity as a monolithic category, ignoring how it is also cross-cut by issues such as race and class (Hollows, 2000; 2008)<sup>iv</sup>. For example, such an approach misses the complexity of the experiences of many African-American women in the same period who prepared food both in the kitchens of White employers and their own kitchens (see Sharpless 2010). It is to these cross-cutting factors which I now turn. What follows draws upon and develops my earlier work concerning gender and food (Meah, 2013b) and is intended to refocus

the feminist food gaze, decentring those narratives which emphasise the ‘oppressive’ character of the kitchen by making visible both minority and migrant women, as well those outside the Global North, whose experiences sometimes contradict the predominant Anglo-American anti-kitchen refrain. Rather than being a space characterised by silence and subjection, the negotiation and distribution of foodwork and domestic responsibilities can, conversely, also afford opportunities to exercise agency and resistance for women who do not belong to the dominant race or class.

#### IV. Entrapped or empowered? Locating women’s agency in kitchens in the Global North<sup>v</sup>

The identification of quotidian domestic food provisioning as the exclusive preserve of women has, perhaps unsurprisingly, led many contemporary Anglo-American feminists to balk at the idea of commenting on either kitchens or cooking. For example, Ruth Hubbard’s initial response to an invitation to contribute to Arlene Avakian’s collection *Through the Kitchen Window* (1997: 5) was one of ‘irritation’: ‘Haven’t we had enough of women being viewed through the kitchen window...?’ Indeed, as has already been discussed, the domestic kitchen has become identified as a space associated with routine and ritual, one which both inscribes and reinforces particular gendered roles and subjectivities, where, Janet Floyd (2004: 62) suggests, ‘status is confirmed and exclusion practiced’. Floyd argues that the kitchen represents an arena in which ‘First and Third World inequalities are “brought home”, a recess repellent to middle-class woman and domestic worker alike’ (ibid. 62). But this viewpoint fails to acknowledge the complexity of women’s experiences and has been challenged by contributors to the special issue of *Gender, Place and Culture* (2006) who point towards women’s capacity to appropriate kitchens for a range of purposes, including remaking and subverting gendered roles and resisting gendered discourses. Indeed, in adopting a more geographically and culturally inclusive approach, it may be possible to reconceptualise foodwork as something more positive and transformative than previously imagined.

According to US food historian Barbara Haber (1997: 68), emphasis on the negative dimensions of foodwork reflects an ‘intellectual framework that sees food and its preparation as fraught with conflict, coercion and frustration’<sup>vi</sup>. Moreover, she points out that ‘kitchens and cooking have become symbols of subservience, rather than pleasure and fulfilment’<sup>vii</sup>. However, speaking from within Women’s Studies in the US, Avakian (1997) has suggested that feminists need to look at meal preparation again. Although women’s contribution to foodwork has undoubtedly been taken for granted in many social and geographical contexts, cooking, she argues, ‘is more complex than victimisation... If we delve into the relationship between women and food we will discover how women have forged *spaces* within that oppression’ (1997: 6 [emphasis added]). Indeed, I would argue that a conceptual shift is made possible if we focus on the issue of *space*, exploring how the spatial dynamics of the kitchen, and its relationship to those spaces beyond, can open up possibilities for expressing agency and power in a way which is not afforded simply by emphasizing the activities undertaken therein. Avakian’s edited collection, *Through the Kitchen Window*, includes a number of personal reflections which facilitate a more nuanced perspective on how food, cooking and kitchens can be - and have been - conceptualised by her contributors, offering an alternative to the anti-*cooking* refrain which has characterised much of what has been written about women and food.

Resistance to the intellectual and cultural imperialism which has characterised much

feminist writing on the Other is not new within post-colonial literature. For example, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), writing in New Zealand, has challenged scholars undertaking research with ethnically Other populations to employ 'decolonising methodologies' which facilitate an epistemology from the *ground up*, relocating intellectual knowledge with the subjects of our research and away from our experience as privileged academics. This process, I argue, requires scholars to *decentre* or *unsettle* the assumptions we make about those whose experiences are beyond our own, assumptions that are often premised on an understanding of the world which takes a White, middle-class, Anglo-American standpoint as the norm. Drawing upon this type of methodology, Meredith Abarca (2006) highlights the importance of avoiding imposing *our meanings* on others. One such imposed stereotype is reflected upon by Helen Barolini (1997) who, growing up as an Italian-American, reports having felt constrained by the image of Italian woman as a 'silent, submissive being stuck in the kitchen... [a] benighted drudge and simple stirrer of sauce' (1997: 228-234), an image which she felt compelled to distance herself from. However, in reconnecting with her family's culinary traditions via her mother's stories of her own youth, Barolini attempts to transform 'the so-called women's room (the kitchen)' from what she describes as 'a holding pen' into 'an embassy of cultural tradition' (1997: 109). Likewise, Abarca re-examines foodways, and their meanings, among working-class Mexican and Mexican-American women, whom she identifies as 'co-theorists'. In *Voices in the Kitchen* she reveals that foodwork can be reconstituted as something other than mandatory labour performed in the service of others (2006: 23). For many of the women she spoke with, cooking is seen as a celebration and affirmation of their talent, skill, knowledge and identity and their resourcefulness. Indeed, many of these women reported that appropriation of the kitchen provided them with a space through which they could express their identities and exercise agency within the survival politics of extended neighbourhood and kinship networks, particularly female in-laws.

Importantly, Abarca observes that when the kitchen is conceptualised as a space rather than a place, it 'can represent a site of multiple changing levels and degrees of freedom, self-awareness, subjectivity and agency' (2006: 19); it is the social interactions which unfold within it that define its significance. Her arguments echo those presented by African-American critics such as bell hooks (1991), who says of her own memories of 'homeplace' that 'houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place - the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls' (1991: 41). For Avakian (2005: 258), cooking and eating are central to Armenian-American women's constructions of their ethnic and gendered identities, enabling them to transgress both patriarchy and ethnic invisibility. Similarly, Marvalene Hughes (1997) writes that for African-American women, cooking is not coterminous with oppression, routine or drudgery, but can be an expression of love, nurturance, creativity and sharing, which became a route through which to escape the painful realities of racist oppression. Similarly, Gloria Wade-Gayles (1997) recalls how her mother 'moved in majesty within our small kitchen, her *woman's room*' a kitchen-temple in which she 'prepared sacrifices for family rituals' (1997, 95-96, [emphasis added]). While the foodwork undertaken in White employers' kitchens may have been characterised as oppressive, Wade-Gayles suggests that in their own kitchens, many women like her mother 'converted what might have been a demand into a desire, a responsibility into a joy, a task into a talent' (1997: 96-97). In these spaces, women worked, served, thought, meditated and bonded with one another. Here, she argues, 'women experienced influence, authority, achievement and healing' (1997: 97). In his observations about the gendered division of



foodwork in Bengali-American households, Krishnendu Ray (2004: 117) also highlights the issues of gifting, sacrifice and power. Citing Pika Ghosh (1995), Ray reports that, in Hindu tradition, 'women assume the responsibility of conveying the transfer of divine beneficence that occurs during the offering and blessing of food... serv[ing] it to her family as if she were a priest'. In this context, the kitchen becomes the 'heart of the sacred geography of home' (2004: 117). While it could be argued that 'tradition' is being invoked here to keep women 'in their place', viewed through a different lens it could also be suggested that it enables women to appropriate a certain amount of symbolic power (ibid. 118). A further consideration is that, as with other migrant populations, seeking to sustain cultural ties may be seen by some as more important than achieving gender equality.

These reflections suggest an alternate interpretation of foodwork by emphasising the transformative character of the *space* in which it is undertaken. For Black and other ethnic minority women in the US, the kitchen can represent a haven from oppression, and a private space in which racial, cultural and feminine identities are affirmed and a sense of belonging and freedom achieved. Similar experiences are also reported by Sian Supski (2006) writing about the experiences of migrant women in post-colonial Australia, and by Lara Pascali (2006) reporting on the use of two *cucinas* - one public, one private - among North American Italian immigrants. Robyn Longhurst et al. (2009: 340) also discuss the role that cooking 'at home' can have in enabling migrant women to 'take on the challenges of a new life in a new place', their activities within their kitchens, their '*homes*', facilitating a sense of place and belonging, which can be read as 'a performative politics of one's subjectivity' (2009: 342, emphasis added). Acknowledging that kitchens have emerged as important spaces for many minority and migrant women, the authors point out that it has been conspicuously absent from geographers' agendas.

But what of the very diverse experiences of women in the Global South? Here I explore a range of examples in which traditionally gendered tasks, and the spaces in which they are performed, have been used as resources in performing creativity and resistance, as well as mechanisms of survival and empowerment<sup>viii</sup>. While explorations of domestic kitchens in the Global North emphasise those spaces immediately within the dwelling of a family or household, elsewhere the boundaries of the 'domestic' are extended or more blurred.

## **V. Gendered subjectivities in the Global South**

In many communities, the distribution of power and responsibility concerning food frequently includes wider kinship networks which go beyond what is frequently understood as the 'nuclear' family in the Global North. Likewise, a combination of spatial restrictions, open-fire cooking and traditions of community-based meal preparation may require that such activities take place outdoors and in communal areas, blurring the distinctions between public and private space. Where most consumers in the Global North are likely to procure their food from a retailer, for many African women, preparing a meal may begin with growing one's own grain, selling it in exchange for other produce, drawing and carrying water, gathering wood and building fires, grinding grain and drying and pounding cassava (Hyder et al., 2005). Since men are more likely to have responsibility for the public aspects of foodwork, including livestock management and marketplace activities, it is unsurprising that many women are assumed to have a lack of power vis-à-vis foodwork. This is reinforced when we consider Adnan Hyder et al's (2005: 328) observation that – within Africa –

women own 1 per cent of the land, receive less than 7 per cent of farm extension services and less than 10 per cent of credit given to small-scale farmers. Moreover, women tend to experience greater nutritional deficits as a result of feeding husbands and sons before themselves and their daughters, as well as eating less food, often of poorer quality. Poor maternal health is compounded by the effects of poverty, high levels of HIV-infection and exacerbated by smoke inhalation during cooking, exhaustion from breastfeeding, childcare and collecting firewood and carrying water long distances, all commonly regarded as exclusively female tasks (Hyder et al. 2005). However, increasing anthropological interest in the role of women in pastoral societies has revealed interesting nuances which shed more light on the distribution of power, and how this has, in some circumstances, been exercised by women. For example, a number of scholars have highlighted women's power in the context of domestic 'gastropolitics' (Appadurai, 1981: 495), which refers to 'conflict or competition over specific cultural or economic resources as it emerges in social interactions around food'. Women are sometimes characterised as 'gatekeepers of the family larder' (Counihan, cited in Holtzman, 2002: 269) since they often play a significant role in the everyday domestic politics of food allocation within the household. Jon Holtzman (2002), for example, indicates that neither Samburu women in Kenya, or those of the Nuer in Southern Sudan, defer to men as 'breadwinners', and among the latter, foodwork can be used to express resistance (2002: 272). Similarly, Elsbeth Robson (2006) reports how Hausa women exercise considerable power over what is prepared and when, how it is distributed and to whom. Indeed, Robson notes, food can be used as a mechanism to express reward and retribution (2006: 671), while the spatial dynamics in which foodwork is undertaken subverts assumptions about the isolation or seclusion of women, affording them power which may be invisible to an outside observer.

In an example from South Africa, Joan Wardrop (2006) illustrates how a blurring of boundaries between domestic and public kitchen spaces has opened up space for entrepreneurial activity among women street vendors in Durban. She reports how food sold from a make-shift barbecue, made from an abandoned supermarket trolley outside a factory, often begins its life in the tiny kitchen of a small, over-crowded township house. Somewhat ironically, street-vendors replicate the gendered dynamics of public/private spaces to ensure the survival of their families: appropriating the domestic, 'female', space for entrepreneurial activity in the public space of the street, a 'male' space, where women are vulnerable to violence. Observations drawing from diverse contexts in sub-Saharan Africa reinforce Allen's (2004: 30) suggestions concerning the diffuse nature of the distribution of power which, he argues, is dependent on 'how issues such as control, regulation, authority, accountability, *discretion* and *autonomy* are conceived and practiced' (emphasis added).

Drawing upon her work with two indigenous communities outside Mexico City, Maria Elisa Christie (2006) specifically challenges the 'anti-kitchen' discourse and questions the assumption that kitchens are sites of social isolation and oppression for women. Rather than representing a domestic 'jail' in which women are secluded in the performance of unpaid and undervalued work, Christie explores women's control over *kitchenspace* (both indoor and outdoor spaces for food preparation). In both communities, women are historically recognised as playing an indispensable role in food preparation. Far from representing a locus of oppression or spatial confinement, *kitchenspace* is appropriated by women, opening up opportunities to contribute and engage with the public life of their communities. The move from private to public is an important one. As Amrita Basu (1995) observes, when associated solely with the privatised nuclear household, foodwork can be seen as

both unrewarding and oppressive. However, when ‘transformed into public domain activities [it] become[s] the basis of social recognition [and] might actually contribute to the transformation, rather than the reinforcement of gender identities’ (1995: 8). This has been witnessed, particularly, in Latin America, where women’s identities as providers of food have been both politicised and harnessed in the proliferation of state- or NGO-sponsored community kitchens in Chile (Frohmann and Valdes, 1995), Bolivia and Peru (Blondet, 1995; Schroeder 2006). Such activity has been hailed as a training ground for entrepreneurial development, leading to the possibility of material improvement within communities. However, as Kathleen Schroeder (2006) notes of community kitchens in Bolivia and Peru, these spaces are not necessarily egalitarian and women who are on the fringes of society may feel either socially excluded or do not have their husbands’ permission. Moreover, she points out that these public kitchens are ‘premised on the volunteer labour of women with already demanding work and family obligations’ (ibid. 666). Elsewhere, women perhaps experience fewer freedoms in making themselves publicly visible. However, in an example from India, Radha Kumar (1995) reports that – in the 1970s - women nonetheless succeeded in making themselves *heard* by forming the United Women’s Anti-Price Rise Front. Specifically mobilising around their role as principal domestic foodworkers, and following the lead of rural women who had taken part in famine agitations, housebound urban housewives registered their support for anti-inflation protestors by beating metal plates with rolling pins at appointed times (1995: 62).

While by no means globally exhaustive and acknowledging the food poverty experienced by millions of women across the Global South, these examples highlight the relevance of Christie’s (2006: 659) reminder that ‘as long as feminists look for women’s participation and power in places where they are not, and ignore the less visible, accessible, or ‘desirable’ places where they are, research is more likely to reflect our own ideological positions than the reality of women’s lives and spaces around the world’. More work is needed that probes the balance of power between men and women in different spaces associated with foodwork both within and outside the home.

## **VI. Masculinities and domestic space in the Global North**

Changing historical and social conditions have required a reconceptualization of gendered roles and responsibilities and the identification of particular spaces within the home as either ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’. According to figures from 16 economically developed countries in the Global North published by Kan et al. (2011), men’s domestic work time displayed an upward trend between the 1960s and 1990s. Although there is evidence of this slowing down over the last decade, time-use data from the UK and US indicate that ‘men’s overall contribution to domestic work increased from 90 and 105 minutes respectively in the 1960s, to 148 and 173 minutes per day respectively in the early 2000s (Kan et al., 2011: 236-37), similar trends also being reported in continental Europe and Scandinavia. This contrasts with corresponding figures for women who are reported to have experienced a decline in overall time spent on domestic work: over 360 minutes per day in the UK and US in the 1960s, compared with 274 minutes per day in the UK and 283 minutes per day in the US by the late 1990s (ibid. 237). While this pattern of convergence in average time spent by men and women on various domestic foodwork tasks has been seen as a cause for optimism by some, signalling greater gender equality, others have argued that, regardless of shifts in the ideologies surrounding women and men’s domestic roles and responsibilities, men’s failure to fill the shortfall

in household labour wrought by women's increasing participation in waged work outside the home suggests that there is little evidence of significant change in practice (cf. McMahon 1999, Singleton & Maher 2004, Segal 2007).

Men's apparent willingness to participate in activities that had previously been conceptualised as 'feminine', or as 'women's work', has been accompanied by ground-breaking developments in the study of masculinity. The work of R.W. Connell (1987, 1995), for example, emphasises the link between gender and power and demonstrates how masculinities can take a variety of different forms. Connell's work usefully pluralised our understanding of contemporary masculinities, exploring their history, social organisation and political dynamics, including those that seek to undermine masculinity's hegemonic and oppressive forms (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Since Connell's early studies there has been a proliferation of work on masculinity and 'men's studies' (usefully summarised in Whitehead et al., 2001 and Kimmel et al., 2005). Moreover, following Judith Butler's (1990) 'queering' of the connections between sex and gender, greater attention has also been paid to gender's performative dimensions, thus challenging the idea that masculine identities can simply be understood in terms of 'what men do'. Attention has also been paid to the social geographies that underpin different constructions of masculinity (e.g. Jackson, 1991; Hopkins and Noble, 2009).

But what men 'do' is no longer confined to their jobs and the masculine spaces wherein these are performed, consequently undermining the work/home dualism which is perceived as perpetuating power and gender imbalances (Smith and Winchester, 1998: 328). Indeed, Connell (1995) has argued that it is the changing nature of paid work and its gender relations - both in relation to women's employment outside the home and in terms of a decline in manufacturing in much of the Global North - which are primarily responsible for the change and negotiation of masculinities. Consequently, this has resulted in shifts in how home is conceptualised and experienced by men and women. Thus, in situations where one's sense of 'being a man' may not be as dependent on 'breadwinner' status as it had been among previous generations, other possibilities are opened up in those spaces beyond the workplace. For example, reporting from Australia, Glendon Smith and Hilary Winchester (1998) argue that for some men, the domestic sphere can represent an opportunity to retreat from the everyday pressures and expectations of work-based identities, as well as the competitiveness of the locker room or 'playing field', while Andrew Gorman-Murray (2013) argues that for partnered white-collar professional men living in Inner Sydney, their domestic activities contribute to a sense of embodied emotional well-being. Reporting on 'house-husbands' in the US, William Beer (1983: 107) has also suggested that participation in housework offers tangible benefits - 'concrete pleasures and immediate gratification' - which are distinct from the alienating routines and lack of creativity that may be associated with paid work. Additionally, partially as a result of increased technologization and a rise in professionalised work, the boundaries between home and work have become increasingly blurred, with more individuals working from home (see Gorman-Murray, 2013) and the use of work-place skills and competencies in domestic routines, and vice versa (see Meah, in press). Clearly, the landscape of home has changed in recent decades, leading Gorman-Murray (2008: 369) to suggest that the shifting relationship between masculinity and domesticity points toward both the way in which ideals of home and changing homemaking practices have (re)figured masculine identities, and how men's changing enactments of domesticity can refashion dominant discourses of home.

## VII. Letting go or defending space? Women, power and domestic life in the Global North

Regardless of shifting social and structural conditions which have expanded opportunities to negotiate a more diverse range of masculine and feminine subjectivities, it is clear from the time-use data reported above, that women continue to shoulder the burden of domestic work (particularly the 'managerial' aspects) within cohabiting households in the many parts of the industrialised North. However, while men are not always reported as being either enthusiastic about housework or proactive in household management, several studies highlight the reluctance of *women* to relinquish control of what is perceived to be *their* domain. For example, reporting from Australia, Jenny Cameron (1998) has highlighted some of the complexities surrounding the negotiation of domestic activities. For example, among her women participants, Cameron reports discomfort at a perceived compromise of their husbands' masculinity through their engagement with 'feminine' tasks, such as ironing, or that this somehow pointed toward a renegeing of responsibility on their own part (1998: 299), perhaps suggesting a sense of 'failed' femininity, at least in conventional terms. Reinforcing my arguments about the spatialized distribution of power and ideas about gendered responsibilities, one participant explains her discomfort with the shifting nature of masculine and feminine subjectivities:

*I'm still very old-fashioned in that way... we always used to say, anything that was inside the house was woman's, anything outside the front door or the back door was man's... and I look at my grandparents, they were brought up the same way, the males have their roles, and the females had their roles... [and] I'd rather let him be masculine than the other way (quoted in Cameron, 1998: 302).*

Studies from the UK also suggest that women are perhaps less willing to relinquish domestic power than has previously been assumed. For example, in their study of fathering, foodwork and family life, Alan Metcalfe et al. (2009) report that male participants tended to occupy 'supporting' roles in the context of cooking, one man likening his role to that of 'sous chef'. In another household, a male participant reports that although his partner is "*really into equality*", this equality does not appear to extend to the kitchen; she is "*big in the kitchen, because it's her dominion*" (ibid. 107). A similar situation is reported by Wendy Wills et al. (2013) in their study of 'kitchen life' in contemporary Britain. They provide the example of a household where the husband complains that he is excluded from cooking by his wife: "*I'm not allowed, she throws me out and takes over... She doesn't trust me*" (ibid. 44). His wife does it because this is the way it has always been done, and doing it herself will ensure that it is done "*properly*". These views are echoed in the interaction between teenage siblings in another participating household where a 15-year old boy reported being excluded from food preparation by his older sister, who – likewise – suggests that he does not do it 'right'. Similar observations are reported among some of the Punjabi, African and European Canadian participants interviewed by Brenda Beagan et al. (2008). Likewise, in her research with Spanish women on the subject of housework, Sarah Pink (2004) reports many as proud of their expertise in this area. Other work on consumption and domestic life in the Global North has emphasised how – rather than representing a source of oppression - working class women, such as those reported above, have gained status, pleasure and power through producing 'good homes' (see for example, Bourke, 1994; Attfield, 1995; Partington, 1995; Hollows, 2000, 2008; Pink 2004).

While some studies that include younger men living in all male house-sharing arrangements (Natalier 2003; Meah and Jackson, in press) have reported that some men 'behave as though they were husbands even in the absence of women who might act as wives' (Natalier, 2003: 265), Wills et al's study includes older men (aged 60-80+) who are 'womanless' (Coxon, 1983). They provide the example of one man, who had lived independently for over 20 years, who explained that he had a female carer who checked in on him each morning. Although foodwork was not part of her remit, he reported that she tried to advise him on how to improve his speciality stew, to which he objected. Another man – in his 80s – is reported as having learnt to cook during the latter stages of his late wife's illness, and was confidently batch cooking and freezing meals, embracing the technology of the microwave. However, he also reports that his daughter, who lived close-by, was both dismissive of his culinary efforts and brought (unwanted) food that she had cooked to put in his freezer. While these examples all relate to White British households, within my own study of domestic kitchen practices (see Meah, in press), there was evidence that women played a 'policing' role vis-à-vis gendered responsibilities within the extended family of a South Asian participant. Azam Habib<sup>ix</sup> (35), for example, reported how his brother-in-law had had "*the piss taken out of him*" by his own mother as a consequence of learning to cook since she saw this as a 'woman's job'. This contrasts with Azam's mother, Nazra (55), who had taught him to cook and who, herself, highlights the role that women can play in oppressing other women through foodwork within South Asian households. Here, she reports that mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, for example, may undermine the efforts of a new member of the family, often instigating beatings by the new husband after prolonged periods of "*nagging*" (see also Abarca, 2006). Looking at all of these examples, could it be said that these women are 'defending' their domestic space?

### VIII. Locating men in foodwork in the Global North

An important issue here is less to do with who is doing what, under what circumstances and how effectively, but rather how domestic foodwork activities are being reported by academics. A number of scholars have noted that, in spite of reports from the UK (Sullivan, 2000), the US (Bianchi et al., 2000) and Australia (Baxter, 2002) which indicate that the gap between women and men's contribution to cooking is the housework domain which has witnessed the greatest narrowing<sup>x</sup>, men's engagement with foodwork has remained conspicuously absent within the growing literature on masculinities and men's shifting relationship with the domestic sphere (see for example Popay et al., 1998; McMahon, 1999; Singleton and Maher, 2004; Segal, 2007; Gorman-Murray, 2008). Indeed, although it is almost 30 years since Anne Murcott (1986) pointed out that 'to consider women, their work responsibilities and viewpoint alone is but half the equation' (cited in Mennell et al., 1992: 110), and while the way in which conceptualisations of what is or is not regarded as 'women's work' may be shifting (Swenson, 2009), there have been very few academic analyses of how the ideologies and practices surrounding women, men and food are changing (Julier and Lindenfeld, 2005). Moreover, there has been a specific 'lack of research based on men's *own* accounts of involvement in 'foodwork' (Metcalf et al., 2009: 95 [emphasis added]). Consequently, Debbie Kemmer (2000: 330) argues that not only does this undermine men's contribution to foodwork, but it likewise reinforces the identity of domestic cooking as a 'feminine' task.

Where men have featured in accounts of food/cooking, these have generally focussed on

the particular environment of the commercial/professional kitchen or other public spaces (see Deutsch, 2005; Holden, 2005). Given the conceptual emphasis that has been placed on linking the study of gender and food and *domestic* cooking with women, empirical data concerning men are sparse, with a tendency to focus on food consumption (see Roos et al., 2001; Sobal, 2005) and men who have fathering roles who ‘help’, rather than lead, in foodwork (see Metcalfe et al. 2009). Others have suggested that cooking is the housework activity most likely to be regarded as ‘fun’, emphasizing men’s fondness for particularly ‘manly’ forms of cooking, often characterized as an extension of men’s interest in outdoor activities such as hiking, hunting and fishing (see Aarseth, 2009). Thomas Adler (1981) has made the connection between men’s predilection for outdoor cooking over open fires and boyhood memories of campfire cooking, while in the US Jay Mechling (2005) has pointed out the emphasis that Boy Scouts handbooks have placed on endorsing the character of cooking as ‘fun’ (see also Dummitt, 1998, on the marketing of barbecues in post-war Canada). It would, therefore, appear, that uncoupling cooking from the domestic kitchen and extending the boundaries in which foodwork is undertaken provide opportunities for men to engage with particularly ‘masculine’ forms of food provisioning, preparation and cooking. Here, we are reminded of Sherrie Inness’ (2001) observations about the proliferation of ‘The Male Cooking Mystique’ within men’s cooking literature in the US, created to reassure men that ‘a trip to the kitchen wouldn’t feminise them’ (2001: 18) (see also Meah, in press).

Within the growing literature on consumption in the Global North, it has become increasingly evident that shifting domestic cultures and material practices have been reflected in the unsettling of certain activities which have conventionally been codified as ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’. Here, cooking is significant since the emergence of consumer lifestyles has meant that it is no longer seen as something performed exclusively by women. Indeed, as I have noted elsewhere (Meah, 2013b; Meah and Jackson, in press), cooking has not simply emerged as a leisure activity (Roos et al., 2001; Hollows, 2003a and b; Holden, 2005; Short, 2006; Aarseth, 2009; Swenson, 2009; Cairns et al., 2010), but also – particularly in the UK - as a potentially ‘cool’, masculine lifestyle activity (Hollows, 2003a: 230). While many television chefs/cooks have attempted to engender cooking as something for all to enjoy, food programmes are regarded as having played a specific role in invoking a particular sense of ‘masculine domesticity’ which has given men a legitimate place at the stove (Swenson, 2009: 47) without fundamentally altering the power dynamics of heterosexual households (although, as noted above, this may not be solely attributable to reluctance on the part of men). Whether these changes simply reinforce existing gender relations or invoke the enactment of a wider range of masculine subjectivities can only be answered empirically.

With the exception of Abarca’s work with Mexican and Mexican-American women (2006), Beagan et al’s (2008) work with families of different ethnic groups in Canada, and Longhurst et al’s (2009) study of migrant women in New Zealand, previous research on domestic foodwork has largely been limited to interview data, questionnaires and/or diaries, which rely on reports of what takes place, and are then ‘used as proxy for studies of what actually *does*’ happen (Murcott, 2000: 78 [emphasis added])<sup>xi</sup>. My own research involving both male and female participants of differing ages (Meah, in press; Meah and Jackson, in press) has attempted to bridge this gap through a combination of qualitative and ethnographic methods, including life history interviews, provisioning ‘go-alongs’ (Kusenbach, 2003), photography, kitchen tours and observed meal preparation, both of which were video-recorded. Because the men who took part in my study are largely (although not exclusively) middle-class and university-educated<sup>xii</sup>, my findings support those of others who have

noted a correlation between men's participation in domestic activities - and foodwork in particular - and education and household income (see Beer, 1983; Metcalfe et al. 2009; Cairns et al. 2010). These men found their way into the kitchen via different routes – some from necessity because of the absence of a woman who was either willing or available to cook - and with varying motivations. Indeed, as documented in Meah (in press), among my male participants, cooking represented an accomplishment during periods of unemployment, was experienced as therapeutic during periods of illness, or as an escape from the alienating pressures associated with paid work. However, as Swinbank (2002) and Short (2006) have noted, men's engagement with cooking is primarily done through *choice*, and some authors have emphasized a 'masculine' predilection for cooking involving displays of skill and competence, using specialised tools and equipment (Adler, 1981; Lupton, 1996; Meah and Jackson, in press) or a predisposition for particularly 'manly' forms of cooking, as discussed above.

In a paper exploring the alleged 'democratisation' of domesticity wrought by men's engagement with foodwork, Peter Jackson and I (Meah and Jackson, in press) explore some of the ways in which men's presence in British kitchens has led to this becoming a contested space, where some women now feel alienated or marginalised. Indeed, as Avakian and Haber (2005: 9) observe in their brief history of feminist food studies, women are not only engaged in a public struggle for equal power with men, but have simultaneously lost influence in the private domain. Tony Chapman (1999: 173) also suggests that displays of culinary competence by men may 'humiliate' their female counterparts. While Helene Aarseth's (2009) work in Norway illustrates situations where men have transformed the kitchen into their domain, apparently seeking to establish an identity and sense of belonging in a space traditionally reserved for women, Jackson and I provide a range of UK examples where women have potentially been marginalised in 'their' space as they have made room for, or given way to, men. At a basic level, men's appropriation of the kitchen might be represented through the incorporation of items which are literally either too big or too heavy for women to use. In other circumstances, conflict may ensue when designing a kitchen to be occupied by both male and female users or when men's entry into the kitchen creates 'more work for mother' cleaning up afterwards<sup>xiii</sup>.

As these examples suggest, men's increasing participation in domestic work in parts of the Global North has contributed to shifting spatialised power and gendered subjectivities. It might also be suggested that men's selective engagement with foodwork and the different standards of cleanliness and order of which they are often accused reflect the persistence of gendered ideologies concerning nutrition and hygiene which have practical consequences in reaffirming women's subjectivities as mothers, carers and nurturers, and as household managers.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

The aim of this paper has been to interrogate understandings of gender and power which interpret the former as fixed, immutable and inseparable from biology, and the latter as something exercised on a 'top-down' basis. By bringing 'space' into the equation, it is possible to move toward a more nuanced understanding in which gender and power are recognised as relational and co-constitutive, gender being one of the modalities through which power is exercised. Examining the distribution of power within the spatial dynamics of the domestic kitchen has required unsettling analyses which



ignore the experiences of women who might not recognise themselves as being 'captive' in the kitchen, as well as extending what are understood as its boundaries. Scholarship from the Global South and from minority and migrant women in the Global North problematizes feminist analyses which, in Christie's (2006: 659) terms, 'look for women's participation and power in places where they are not' while simultaneously ignoring those less visible places where they are, wherein many have expressed agency and resistance, as well as performing more stereotypically 'feminine' activities concerned with nurturing and care. Indeed, for some, it is precisely via their subjectivities as mothers and care-givers that they have found the means through which to assert their authority and control over the use of the kitchen and household food resources, for example.

Additionally, however, if the complexities surrounding gender and power are to be fully understood, including how they are in part constituted within and played out in the kitchen, it also seems pertinent to present the 'other half' of the equation by examining the ways in which men in parts of the Global North are contributing to foodwork, and how their increasing involvement in foodwork is contributing to reconstituting the ways in masculine and feminine subjectivities are conceptualised and experienced. In doing so, it becomes apparent that the distribution of power in domestic kitchen spaces is more diverse, diffuse, dynamic and contingent than previously thought. This is particularly evident in parts of the Global North, where individuals' shifting relationships across the boundaries of home, work and leisure are manifested through feminine and masculine subjectivities which are not neatly or discretely contained in the spatial domains they occupy. Rather, slippage occurs as men and women move within and between these spaces. Additionally, changing social and structural conditions also require a fundamental reconceptualisation of questions regarding what constitutes 'masculinity' and 'femininity' and the assumed 'naturalness' of sex-based domestic roles and practices: for example, is it 'demeaning' for contemporary British men to cook, as it may have been regarded by earlier generations (Hockey et al., 2007), and is it still 'unmanly' for Australian men to iron (Cameron, 1998)?

My final point is one of method. For the most part, the literature I have discussed has been premised upon interview data and self-reported behaviour (Gregson and Rose, 2000, Abarca 2006, Beagan et al. 2008, and Longhurst et al. 2009 are notable exceptions) which, by definition, foreground discursive understandings of power. My own empirical data drew on a combination of qualitative and ethnographic methods, placing me inside my participants' kitchens. From this perspective I was able to observe a range of performances which were enacted by women and men in relation to each other and their families, supported by various 'props' and intermediaries. Indeed it may never be possible to establish the extent to which such performances were 'staged' for my benefit, but my presence as an observer undoubtedly had an impact upon what was being enacted. In one all-male household, for example, the participant rescheduled a visit during which I would be filming on the basis that his son had not yet cleaned the kitchen. As reported in Meah and Jackson (in press), the entire house was uncharacteristically clean when the observation eventually took place. And in another case, I reinforced stereotypes concerning the relationship between femininity and care by helping to occupy fractious children aged 14 months and four years while their mother prepared the evening meal, their father remaining out of sight in his study, emerging only when the meal was ready. This combination of methods does, however, make visible how both gender and power are exercised, reinforced, subverted and disrupted at the level of domestic *practice* as women and men move between different spaces (the kitchen, shops, supermarkets etc.), engaging with a range of public and policy discourses, people and things, and with subjectivities associated with the

other spaces they occupy. However, in spite of a burgeoning literature on masculinities (in particular) and gender (in general), the impact of shifting distributions of responsibility and power remain under-theorised and under-researched. Further empirical work, incorporating diverse social and ethnic groupings in the Global North and South, focusing on a variety of domestic practices, and utilising a range of qualitative and ethnographic methods, may prove beneficial in extending current understandings of gender, power and space.

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<sup>i</sup> See also Robinson and Hockey (2011) for a sociological account of performances of masculine identities as men move across public and private spaces over the duration of the life-course.

<sup>ii</sup> Relationality refers not just to person-to-person interactions, but also to those between people and 'things', such as food, cookbooks, utensils and appliances.

<sup>iii</sup> For more on the history of the modern kitchen, see Cieraad (2002); Freeman (2004); Llewellyn (2004); Saarikangas (2006); Meah (2013a).

<sup>iv</sup> See also Bonney and Reinach (1993) for a 'reconsideration' of the 'Oakley Thesis twenty years later'.

<sup>v</sup> The discussion of migrant and indigenous women draws upon my essay on Gender in *Food Words: essays in culinary culture* (Meah, 2013b).

<sup>vi</sup> Accounts of conflict/violence in the context of meal preparation and consumption can be found in Dobash and Dobash (1980); Ellis (1983); Katrak (1997); Counihan (2005); Hockey et al. (2007); Meah and Jackson (in press).

<sup>vii</sup> For a wider discussion of how pleasure has succumbed to 'anxiety' in the context of food, see Meah (2013c)

<sup>viii</sup> While there is a wealth of literature on women in the Global South, the following review draws very selectively on this material, focusing mainly on sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and South Asia. In general, these sources do not focus specifically on women's involvement in foodwork but deal with their domestic responsibilities in passing as part of a wider discussion of the gendered division of labour inside and outside the home.

<sup>ix</sup> Names are pseudonyms.

<sup>x</sup> However, Sullivan (2000: 452) notes that, in real terms, this equates with an increase of less than one minute per year over a 22 year period.

<sup>xi</sup> Other exceptions include Evans' (2012) work in Manchester and ethnographic work across the UK by Wills et al. (2013). However, the former focuses on food waste, while the latter is specifically concerned with food safety.

<sup>xii</sup> All participants also identified as heterosexual. Further research is needed concerning the domestic practices of men with different sexualities.

<sup>xiii</sup> This point is also made by Beagan et al (2008: 664), among whose participants 'getting others to help in the kitchen was frequently described as more trouble than it was worth'.