



CHAPTER - 10

**GENDER AND FOOD LABOUR: INVISIBLE LABOUR IN THE KITCHEN
AND THE GENDERED DIVISION OF FOOD WORK IN URBAN FAMILIES**

Sayantani Das

*State Aided College Teacher, Haringhata Mahavidyalaya,
University of Kalyani, West Bengal, India
E-Mail: sayantani.socio@gmail.com*

Abstract

Food labour—encompassing the planning, procurement, preparation, serving, and emotional management of meals within households—constitutes one of the most fundamental yet persistently invisible forms of domestic work in contemporary society. This paper critically examines the gendered organization of food labour within urban Indian families, arguing that domestic food work must be understood as a form of reproductive labour that is central to sustaining households, reproducing labour power, maintaining patriarchal family structures, and supporting capitalist economies. Drawing on feminist, Marxist, socialist, radical, and intersectional theoretical frameworks, the paper demonstrates that the invisibility of food labour is not incidental but structurally embedded within historically gendered divisions of labour that continue to shape household organization in urban India. Even within dual-income, technologically modern urban households, women continue to perform the overwhelming majority of physical, cognitive, and emotional food work. The paper pays particular attention to the role of caste and class in organizing food labour within the Indian context, the emergence of a compounded “double burden” for professional women, and the ways in which digital food platforms and consumer technologies reorganize rather than eliminate women’s domestic responsibilities. By locating kitchen work within wider systems of gender, capitalism, and social reproduction, the study renders visible the hidden labour that sustains everyday social life while remaining largely unrecognized within dominant economic and sociological frameworks.

Keywords: food labour, gender, invisible labour, social reproduction, domestic work, feminist political economy, mental load, caste, urban India, patriarchy, double burden

Introduction

Food is often perceived as a simple biological necessity or a matter of personal preference. However, from a sociological perspective, food is deeply embedded within systems of labour, culture, gender, class, caste, and power. Behind every meal lies a complex chain of activities - planning, purchasing, preparation, serving, cleaning, emotional care, and household coordination - that together constitute what feminist scholars have termed food labour. This labour is foundational to human social life, yet it remains among the most systematically undervalued and unrecognized forms of work in contemporary societies.

Food preparation is one of the oldest and most essential forms of labour within human societies. Unlike wage

labour performed in formal economic spaces, domestic food work has historically remained invisible, unpaid, and undervalued. Much of this invisibility derives from the fact that food work occurs within private domestic spaces and has been historically feminized - treated not as labour at all, but as a natural extension of femininity, maternal instinct, and wifely duty. Across societies and historical periods, women have disproportionately borne the responsibility for domestic food labour, encompassing cooking, cleaning, meal preparation, serving food, grocery management, nutritional planning, preserving culinary traditions, and caring for the dietary and emotional needs of family members.

Within most households, women are expected to organize everyday food practices - from deciding menus and purchasing ingredients to preparing meals and maintaining kitchen spaces - while simultaneously managing caregiving responsibilities for children, the elderly, and sick family members. Despite being essential to the survival, health, and social reproduction of households, this labour is rarely recognized as productive economic activity because it is unpaid and performed within the private sphere of the home. Instead, food-related domestic work is naturalized as an expression of women's innate nurturing role, reinforcing patriarchal gender norms that define caregiving and household management as feminine duties rather than skilled labour. Consequently, women's contribution to sustaining families, maintaining nutrition, reproducing labour power, and preserving cultural practices remains largely invisible within dominant economic systems and traditional sociological frameworks.

In contemporary urban India, transformations associated with globalization, neoliberal economic restructuring, rapid urbanization, technological advancement, and women's increasing participation in higher education and paid employment have significantly altered family structures, labour patterns, and domestic arrangements. Joint and extended family systems are gradually being replaced by nuclear households, consumer culture has intensified, and digital technologies such as food delivery applications, online grocery platforms, and modern kitchen appliances have transformed everyday food practices. These changes have created the appearance of greater convenience and modernization within urban domestic life. However, despite these structural and cultural shifts, the burden of domestic food labour continues to remain disproportionately feminized. Women are still largely expected to manage cooking, meal planning, grocery organization, nutritional caregiving, kitchen maintenance, and the emotional labour associated with feeding families—even when they are simultaneously engaged in full-time paid employment. As a result, many urban women experience a "double burden" or "second shift," wherein professional responsibilities coexist with traditional domestic expectations (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). The persistence of unequal food labour within urban households raises important sociological questions regarding gender, power, and social reproduction. Why does domestic food work continue to remain feminized despite women's increasing economic participation? How does invisible kitchen labour reproduce patriarchal relations within contemporary families? In what ways do neoliberalism, digital technologies, platform capitalism, and consumer culture reorganize rather than eliminate women's domestic responsibilities? How do caste and class inequalities shape the organization of food labour within urban India, particularly through the employment of paid domestic workers from marginalized social groups? These questions reveal that patriarchy does not simply disappear with modernization; rather, it adapts to changing economic and social conditions while continuing to structure gendered expectations surrounding care and domesticity.

This paper critically examines the gendered organization of food labour within urban families, with particular emphasis on the Indian context while simultaneously engaging broader feminist sociological scholarship. It investigates the ways in which food-related domestic work is socially distributed, normalized, emotionalized, and rendered invisible within everyday household life. The study argues that food labour constitutes a crucial site through which gender inequality is continuously reproduced despite contemporary narratives of modernization, women's empowerment, and gender equality. Using a feminist sociological framework, the paper explores how patriarchy, capitalism, emotional labour, and social reproduction intersect within domestic food practices, demonstrating that the invisibility of food labour is not accidental or incidental, but structurally embedded within historically gendered divisions of labour.

The paper defines food labour and situates it within broader sociological debates on social reproduction and domestic work. It reviews the major theoretical perspectives - feminist, Marxist, radical feminist, socialist feminist, and intersectional - that illuminate the gendered dimensions of food labour. This is followed by an explanation of the Indian context in depth, attending to caste, class, and regional variation. The paper subsequently analyses the role of digital technologies and consumer culture in transforming but not eliminating gendered food labour, before discussing implications for theory and policy, and drawing concluding observations.

Defining Food Labour: Beyond the Act of Cooking

Food labour encompasses the broad range of activities involved in acquiring, preparing, organizing, managing, and distributing food within households. Feminist sociologists argue that food labour should not be narrowly understood

as the simple act of cooking, because it includes multiple interconnected forms of labour that together sustain everyday social life. These include physical labour such as cleaning, cutting, cooking, and serving food; cognitive labour such as meal planning, budgeting, and nutritional management; emotional labour associated with caregiving and maintaining family well-being; and cultural labour related to preserving traditions, rituals, and social identities through food practices (DeVault, 1991). Food labour is therefore deeply embedded within household organization and social reproduction.

Within most households, food labour extends beyond visible kitchen activities and involves continuous managerial responsibilities. Women often remain responsible for anticipating household needs, monitoring grocery supplies, remembering dietary preferences, organizing festive meals, and ensuring the nutritional well-being of family members. Feminist scholars describe this as part of the "mental load" or invisible labour that structures domestic life yet remains largely unrecognized (Daming, 2019; Hochschild & Machung, 1989). Because food work is repetitive and performed within private spaces, it is frequently naturalized as an extension of feminine care rather than acknowledged as skilled and labour-intensive work.

Traditional economic and sociological theories historically ignored domestic food work because it did not directly generate wages or participate in formal market exchange. Labour was primarily conceptualized as productive activity performed in factories, offices, and other public economic institutions. Activities performed within households, particularly by women, were excluded from mainstream economic analysis because they were associated with family responsibility and emotional care rather than economic production. This distinction between "productive" and "reproductive" labour reflected broader patriarchal assumptions that undervalued domestic work and rendered women's contribution to household survival socially invisible.

Feminist scholars fundamentally challenged this framework by arguing that domestic labour, including food work, is essential for sustaining economic systems because it reproduces labour power on a daily and generational basis (Federici, 2004; Dalla Costa & James, 1972). Workers can only participate in productive economic activities because food is prepared, bodies are cared for, children are raised, and households are maintained through unpaid domestic labour. Food labour therefore plays a crucial role in maintaining the physical health, emotional stability, and social continuity necessary for capitalist economies and social institutions to function effectively.

Food labour also contributes to the reproduction of cultural values and social hierarchies. Through cooking practices, women frequently transmit traditions, religious practices, caste norms, and regional identities across generations. In India, where food practices are deeply linked to religion, kinship, and caste relations, domestic food work becomes central to maintaining collective identities and social boundaries. Thus, food labour is not merely an economic or household activity but also a social and cultural institution that reproduces gender roles, family structures, and systems of social inequality. For these reasons, feminist sociologists conceptualize food labour as a central component of reproductive labour—the set of activities necessary for sustaining human life and reproducing society across generations.

Studies across societies consistently demonstrate that women spend significantly more time than men performing unpaid domestic and care work, particularly food-related labour such as cooking, meal preparation, cleaning, grocery management, and nutritional caregiving. According to the International Labour Organization, women globally perform nearly three times more unpaid care and domestic labour than men, revealing the persistent gendered division of labour within households. In India, this disparity is even more severe. Findings from the National Statistical Office Time Use Survey indicate that women devote substantially greater amounts of time to unpaid domestic services—including cooking and food preparation—while men's participation in routine household food work remains comparatively limited (NSSO, 2019). These patterns persist despite increasing female participation in higher education, professional employment, and urban labour markets, demonstrating that modernization alone has not dismantled gender inequalities within domestic spaces.

Theoretical Perspectives on Domestic Food Labour

Feminist Political Economy: Domestic Labour as Reproductive Labour

One of the most significant contributions of feminist sociology and feminist political economy was the recognition of domestic labour as a form of productive labour rather than a natural extension of femininity or private family responsibility. Prior to the emergence of second-wave feminism during the 1960s and 1970s, mainstream economics and classical sociological theories largely ignored housework because it did not generate wages or commodities for market exchange. Domestic activities such as cooking, cleaning, feeding, childcare, emotional caregiving, and

household maintenance were treated as "non-work" despite their central importance to social and economic life. Feminist scholars fundamentally challenged this assumption by arguing that unpaid domestic labour constitutes the hidden foundation upon which both patriarchy and capitalism depend.

Second-wave feminist theorists emphasized that the household is not an apolitical private sphere detached from economic systems but rather a central site of social reproduction where labour power is produced and maintained daily. Through domestic work, women sustain workers physically, emotionally, and socially by preparing food, maintaining household stability, nurturing children, and caring for family members. These activities reproduce labour power without wages and thereby reduce the cost of capitalist production. Feminist scholars therefore argued that capitalism benefits directly from women's unpaid labour while simultaneously rendering it invisible within formal economic calculations.

A major contribution to this debate came from Silvia Federici, whose work connected domestic labour to the historical development of capitalism and patriarchy. In *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici (2004) argues that women's unpaid domestic labour became institutionalized during the transition to capitalism. She demonstrates that capitalism required not only wage labour but also the systematic control of women's reproductive and domestic capacities. Housework was naturalized as feminine duty rather than recognized as labour, enabling capitalist economies to obtain the reproduction of labour power without direct payment. Federici therefore challenged the assumption that cooking and caregiving are merely personal or emotional acts, arguing instead that they are economically productive activities essential for sustaining capitalist systems. Within this framework, food labour occupies a particularly central position because nourishment is necessary for the daily reproduction of labour power: workers cannot participate in capitalist production without food, care, and physical maintenance.

Similarly, Mariarosa Dalla Costa argued that domestic labour is integral to capitalist production because it creates and maintains labour power. In *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Dalla Costa and James (1972) emphasized that housework is not outside capitalism but deeply embedded within it. They argued that women's unpaid labour reproduces workers every day by feeding, cleaning, caring for, and emotionally supporting them. Domestic food labour, therefore, is not simply a private family responsibility but a socially necessary activity that sustains economic production. Dalla Costa and other feminist theorists associated with the "Wages for Housework" movement demanded recognition of domestic labour as productive work deserving social and economic value.

Feminist sociology also highlighted how domestic food labour is deeply gendered through socialization and patriarchal ideology. From childhood, women are often taught that cooking and caregiving are natural expressions of femininity, morality, and maternal responsibility. As a result, domestic food work becomes normalized as "women's duty" rather than recognized as skilled labour requiring time, physical effort, planning, emotional management, and cultural knowledge. This ideological naturalization contributes to the invisibility of food labour and reinforces women's unequal burden within households.

Marxist Feminist Perspective

Marxist feminists extended classical Marxist analysis by examining how capitalism depends upon women's unpaid reproductive labour. While traditional Marxism focused primarily on wage labour and industrial production, Marxist feminists argued that capitalist economies cannot function without the unpaid labour performed within households. Domestic labour reproduces labour power, women subsidize capitalism through unpaid work, household labour reduces employers' responsibility for worker maintenance, and capitalism and patriarchy operate together to sustain women's exploitation (Benston, 1969; Walby, 1986).

Food labour is central within this perspective because feeding workers and families ensures the continuation of productive labour. Cooking and caregiving become economically necessary activities that remain excluded from wages and labour rights. Marxist feminists therefore argue that kitchens operate as hidden economic institutions where reproductive labour sustains capitalist production. Women's unpaid domestic labour effectively lowers the social costs of labour reproduction for capitalist economies, constituting what Federici (1975) described as an ongoing subsidy to capital extracted from women's bodies and time.

Radical Feminist Perspective

Radical feminists locate women's oppression primarily within patriarchal systems of male dominance. From this perspective, domestic labour is not only economically exploitative but also ideologically oppressive because it reinforces women's subordination within family structures. Patriarchy organizes domestic labour according to rigid

gender roles, women are culturally conditioned to associate caregiving with femininity, domesticity limits women's autonomy and public participation, and emotional labour and caregiving become mechanisms of gender control.

Food labour occupies a particularly important role within patriarchal ideology because feeding families is culturally associated with feminine morality, motherhood, sacrifice, and nurturing. Women are expected to derive emotional fulfillment from serving food and caring for others, even when these responsibilities produce exhaustion and unequal workloads. Cooking therefore becomes not merely functional labour but ideological labour that reproduces gender norms and patriarchal expectations within everyday family life. Through repetitive domestic practices, women internalize caregiving responsibilities while men are often positioned as recipients rather than equal participants in food work (Lupton, 1996).

Socialist Feminist Perspective

Socialist feminism combines Marxist and radical feminist approaches by arguing that women's oppression results from the interaction between capitalism and patriarchy. Socialist feminists emphasize that domestic labour cannot be understood solely through economics or solely through patriarchy; rather, both systems work together to sustain women's unequal position (Hartmann, 1979). Within this framework, patriarchy assigns food labour to women while capitalism benefits from unpaid reproductive labour. Consumer culture intensifies expectations surrounding domesticity and caregiving, and women experience a "double burden" of paid work and unpaid household labour.

In urban societies, women increasingly participate in professional employment while simultaneously remaining responsible for domestic food management. Technological modernization and consumer culture may alter the form of domestic labour—replacing grinding grain by hand with electric grinders, or replacing market visits with app-based delivery—but they do not necessarily redistribute labour equally between genders. The socialist feminist framework thus explains why modernization produces not liberation from domestic labour but a transformation of its form while its gendered distribution persists.

Intersectional Feminist Perspective

Intersectional feminism, drawing on the foundational work of Kimberlé Crenshaw and subsequent scholars, emphasizes that domestic food labour is shaped not only by gender but also by caste, class, race, religion, and other forms of social inequality. In India, caste plays a particularly important role in organizing food labour. Historically, food preparation, purity rules, and kitchen practices have been deeply connected to caste hierarchies: the ritual purity of the cook, the acceptability of food from particular social groups, and the management of kitchen space are all regulated by caste norms that vary across regions, communities, and household compositions (Deshpande, 2003; Mankekar, 1999).

In upper-caste Hindu households, women's food labour carries additional ritual and moral weight: prescriptions around cooking during menstruation, requirements for bathing before entering the kitchen, prohibitions on certain food combinations, and the obligation to offer food to deities before family members all intensify the scope and social significance of domestic food work. Dalit women and women from Other Backward Classes navigate distinct pressures in which food labour intersects with histories of exclusion and exploitation, complicating any homogeneous account of gendered food work in India.

Class inequalities also decisively shape food labour arrangements. Middle-class women may outsource domestic work to paid domestic workers drawn from lower-caste and migrant communities. Working-class women often perform both paid domestic labour in other households and unpaid domestic labour in their own. Professional women continue to experience emotional and managerial responsibility for household food systems even when employing domestic workers. Intersectional scholars therefore argue that food labour must be analyzed through interconnected systems of gender, caste, and class power, attending to the ways in which privilege in one dimension frequently conceals exploitation in another.

The Mental Load:

Cognitive and Emotional Dimensions of Food Labour

Across theoretical perspectives, feminist scholars have increasingly emphasized that food labour involves dimensions far beyond the physical act of cooking. Daminger (2019) identifies "cognitive labour" as consisting of four phases: anticipating needs, identifying options, deciding between them, and monitoring outcomes. Women disproportionately bear responsibility across all phases. In the domain of food, this cognitive labour encompasses knowing the contents of the refrigerator and pantry; tracking the nutritional needs of family members; planning weekly

menus; maintaining grocery lists; monitoring food budgets; researching recipes; and coordinating meal preparation with other domestic and professional commitments.

This mental load is particularly insidious because it is invisible even to those who perform it. Women in dual-income households frequently describe an asymmetry in which male partners are "willing to help" with cooking tasks but remain unaware of the planning infrastructure that makes those tasks possible. As Hochschild and Machung (1989) observe, this pattern means that even when men contribute to physical food preparation, women retain - what Allen and Hawkins (1999) term "household management responsibility" - the ongoing cognitive work of organizing and overseeing the household food system. The result is a situation in which visible task-sharing coexists with invisible cognitive inequality, making gendered food labour difficult to perceive and therefore difficult to challenge.

The emotional dimensions of food labour compound this invisibility. Women are expected not only to prepare food but to do so in ways that express love, care, and cultural identity - to make the act of feeding a form of emotional communication (DeVault, 1991). This expectation transforms food preparation from a neutral technical task into a moralized practice in which failure is experienced as personal inadequacy. The emotional labour of feeding families - managing preferences, moderating conflicts, responding to dissatisfaction, communicating care through food - constitutes a significant and systematically unrecognized component of women's domestic burden.

Food Labour in Urban India:

Caste, Class, and the Persistence of Inequality

The Moral Dimensions of Food Labour in Indian Families

In India, the gendered dimensions of food work are shaped by a layered social inheritance in which patriarchal norms, caste-based prescriptions around food handling and purity, regional cultural traditions, and the legacies of colonial modernity intersect in complex ways (Patel, 2010; Banerjee-Guha, 2009). The expectation that women will feed the family is not merely a social convention but a deeply moralized obligation, tied to ideologies of wifely duty, maternal self-sacrifice, and household honour. This moral framing renders food labour especially resistant to redistribution, because to question it is to invite judgment not only about labour arrangements but about character and femininity itself.

The figure of the ideal Indian wife and mother is routinely constructed through her relationship to food: her ability to prepare fresh, nutritious, culturally appropriate meals is a principal index of her social worth. Regional and caste communities maintain distinct food traditions that women are expected to preserve and transmit across generations, investing domestic cooking with cultural and kinship significance that elevates its symbolic value while obscuring its labour content. Festival meals, ritual foods, and hospitality cooking - all disproportionately managed by women - represent extensions of this cultural labour that require extensive planning, skill, and physical effort while remaining largely unrecognized as work.

The Double Burden in Urban Professional Households

India's rapid urbanization and the expansion of women's participation in professional employment have significantly altered the landscape of domestic food labour without fundamentally redistributing it. Research consistently demonstrates that urban Indian women in dual-income households continue to perform the majority of domestic food work, resulting in a distinctive double burden in which professional responsibilities are layered upon unchanged domestic expectations (Chaudhuri, 2004; Kumar & Singh, 2018).

The temporal dimensions of this double burden are acute. Employed women in urban households describe elaborate choreographies in which meal preparation is fitted around commuting, professional work, childcare, and other domestic responsibilities. The concept of "time poverty" (Vickery, 1977; Folbre, 2001) captures the structural constraint within which this choreography operates: employed women experience not merely a shortage of time but a qualitative difference in the kind of time available to them—fragmented, interrupted, and obligatory in ways that their male partners' time is not. India's National Time Use Survey data corroborate this picture at the national level, consistently showing that Indian women spend several times more hours per day on unpaid domestic work than men, a gap that widens rather than narrows with the addition of paid employment (NSSO, 2019).

Male partners' participation in food labour, where it occurs, is frequently described by both partners as a form of "helping" rather than shared responsibility—a linguistic framing that reproduces the assumption that cooking is fundamentally women's work (Coltrane, 2000). The gap between men's self-reported domestic participation and their partners' accounts of that participation is itself significant, suggesting that food labour is evaluated through different

normative frameworks depending on who is doing the evaluating. Men tend to count physical cooking tasks as their contribution; women tend to count the planning, management, and cognitive infrastructure that enables those tasks as their own unrecompensed labour.

Caste, Class, and the Domestic Labour Market

A distinctive feature of middle-class food labour in urban India is the widespread reliance on paid domestic workers—cooks, kitchen help, and cleaning staff—who are drawn disproportionately from lower-caste, lower-class, and migrant communities. This arrangement displaces post-meal and cleaning labour rather than redistributing it equitably within the household, while simultaneously reproducing hierarchies of caste, class, and gender through the domestic labour market. Crucially, the management of the domestic worker—scheduling, instruction, quality oversight, payment negotiation, and continuity management—remains predominantly the responsibility of the female household member, constituting a further layer of invisible management labour.

The food labour performed by domestic workers occupies a particularly ambiguous position within the sociology of domestic work: it is paid, yet it is frequently underpaid, unregulated, and performed under conditions of significant social inequality. Domestic workers from Dalit and lower-caste backgrounds may face ritual exclusions from certain kitchen spaces or food preparation tasks within upper-caste households, even as they are employed to perform cleaning and cooking in those same spaces. This produces complex and often contradictory arrangements in which caste purity norms and economic necessity are simultaneously negotiated within everyday kitchen practices. The burden of invisible domestic labour is thus transferred from privileged women to other structurally vulnerable women within unequal social systems, without being eliminated or equitably redistributed.

Regional Diversity and the Scope of Food Labour

India's extraordinary regional culinary diversity shapes the labour demands of domestic food preparation in ways that are not adequately captured by generic accounts of domestic cooking. The preparation of regionally specific dishes—whether a Bengali fish curry requiring careful spice management, a Tamil Nadu meal involving multiple accompanying preparations, or a Punjabi dal requiring extended cooking—carries distinct time, skill, and equipment demands. Regional food traditions also carry expectations of freshness, home preparation, and seasonal appropriateness that resist the substitution of convenience foods, intensifying the scope of domestic food labour relative to contexts where processed and convenience foods are more culturally acceptable.

Festival and ritual cooking further amplifies the labour demands placed on women in specific regional and community contexts. The preparation of Durga Puja bhog, Eid feasts, Onam sadyas, Diwali sweets, or Pongal dishes represents a concentrated intensification of food labour that is culturally celebrated as a collective achievement while remaining individual women's primary responsibility. This celebratory framing of festival food labour exemplifies the broader process through which the hardest and most skilled food work is rendered invisible through its ideological transformation into cultural expression and maternal love.

Digital Food Technologies and the Reorganization of Gendered Labour

Contemporary urban societies have transformed food practices through globalization, digital food platforms, neoliberal consumer culture, fast-food industries, online grocery systems, and technological modernization. However, these transformations have not eliminated gender inequality in domestic labour. Instead, patriarchy adapts to modernization: women continue to manage meal planning, nutritional care, emotional caregiving, and household food coordination even when technological conveniences selectively reduce physical labour. The rise of "healthy eating" cultures, intensive motherhood ideologies, and social media representations of domestic perfection has in some cases increased emotional and reputational pressures surrounding food labour for women, raising the standards to which domestic cooking is held even as the technologies available to perform it have expanded.

The rapid growth of digital food technologies in urban India - encompassing food delivery applications, recipe platforms, YouTube cooking channels in regional languages, grocery delivery services, and meal-kit subscriptions - constitutes a significant transformation of the material conditions of food work. Feminist analyses of technology and domestic labour suggest, however, that these technologies have largely reproduced rather than disrupted the gendered architecture of food labour (Wajcman, 2004; Cowan, 1983). The household food manager - who in the majority of urban Indian households remains female - must now navigate an expanded landscape of platforms, options, and information, requiring increased cognitive investment even as physical labour is selectively reduced.

Food delivery applications have transformed the daily calculus of meal preparation for many urban households,

offering an alternative to home cooking on evenings when time or energy is depleted. However, the cognitive labour of managing household food delivery - knowing which platforms serve regional cuisine preferences, tracking promotional offers, maintaining family preferences in app settings, managing dietary restrictions, and ensuring child-appropriate nutrition - falls primarily to women. For women in professional employment, delivery apps represent a form of outsourcing that reduces physical labour without eliminating planning responsibility: women remain the household's food managers even when they are not its cooks. For men, delivery apps often function as a means of exercising food autonomy without engaging in food labour, ordering for themselves or the household without taking on responsibility for household nutrition, variety, or the ritual and social dimensions of commensality that remain important in Indian family life.

Recipe platforms and cooking media occupy a particularly significant position in the landscape of digital food labour, given the richness of Indian regional cuisines and the cultural investment in authentic home cooking. Women describe extensive engagement with recipe content - following food bloggers, saving recipes across platforms, watching regional cooking channels - that constitutes an extension of food labour into leisure time. This permeation of food planning into digital leisure time represents a contemporary form of what Hochschild (1983) terms "the commercialisation of feeling" - the extension of affective and cognitive labour beyond formally designated work time. Women frequently do not recognize this recipe-browsing activity as food labour, precisely because its consumption character disguises its planning function, illustrating the depth to which the mental load is naturalized as ordinary life rather than identified as work.

Wajcman's (2004) argument that technologies designed to save time often generate new time demands is clearly illustrated in the domain of digital food platforms. The proliferation of food content, options, and platforms does not reduce the scope of food management responsibility; it expands the informational landscape that the household food manager must monitor and navigate. Feminist technology scholars therefore caution against technological determinism in accounts of domestic labour: the form of food work changes with technology, but its gendered distribution is determined by social relations that technology alone cannot transform.

Discussion: Towards a Visible Politics of Food Labour

The theoretical perspectives reviewed in this paper converge on a central insight: domestic food labour is not a private matter of individual preference or natural feminine disposition, but a structural phenomenon embedded within systems of patriarchy, capitalism, caste, and class that systematically assign the work of social reproduction to women. The invisibility of this labour is itself a social achievement - produced through ideological naturalization, cultural valorization of "feminine" caregiving, and the confinement of food work to the private domestic sphere where formal economic accounting does not reach.

The Indian context illuminates dimensions of gendered food labour that are under-theorized in the predominantly Western literature on domestic work. The ritual and caste dimensions of Indian food labour invest kitchen work with moral and cosmological significance that deepens its hold on women's time and identity. The multi-generational household structures that remain common in urban India multiply the food labour obligations of daughters-in-law in ways that nuclear family models do not capture. The extraordinary regional diversity of Indian food traditions intensifies the skill and knowledge demands of authentic domestic cooking. And the domestic labour market - through which middle-class households transfer post-meal and cleaning burdens to lower-caste and migrant women - demonstrates that food labour can be redistributed within gender and caste hierarchies without being equitably shared across them.

The persistence of unequal food labour has significant implications beyond the household. Time-use inequality in domestic labour shapes women's labour market participation, career trajectories, and lifetime earnings (Folbre, 2001; Ferrant et al., 2014). The physical and psychological costs of the double burden - documented across studies of employed women in urban India - represent a public health as well as a social justice concern. And the systematic invisibility of food labour within economic accounting and public policy perpetuates a political economy in which the care work that sustains society is treated as free, infinite, and naturally feminine.

Recognizing domestic food labour as socially and economically valuable is therefore not merely an academic exercise but a political necessity for any serious project of gender equality. This recognition requires transformation at multiple levels: in the ideological frameworks through which food work is understood and valued; in the public policies that support or fail to support the equitable distribution of domestic labour; in the legal and institutional frameworks that regulate paid domestic work; and in the everyday practices of households in which the mental load is allocated,

negotiated, and potentially redistributed.

Caste, Class, and a Specifically Indian Feminist Politics of Food Labour

Any feminist politics of food labour in India must reckon seriously with caste and class as organizing principles of domestic work, not merely as additional variables that modify a fundamentally gender-based analysis. The transfer of food and cleaning labour from upper-caste, middle-class women to lower-caste and migrant domestic workers does not represent a feminist solution to the problem of gendered food labour; it represents its displacement along the axes of caste and class while leaving the gendered structure of household management responsibility intact. A feminist politics that is limited to the redistribution of food labour between men and women within individual households, without attending to the exploitation of domestic workers who absorb that labour, is partial at best and complicit at worst.

An Indian feminist politics of food labour must therefore operate simultaneously at multiple levels. It must challenge the patriarchal norms that position cooking as a natural feminine duty within households across caste and class positions. It must challenge the caste ideologies that assign the most physically demanding and socially stigmatized domestic work to women from marginalized communities. And it must challenge the class structures that enable some women to purchase relief from domestic burdens by transferring those burdens to other women under conditions of significant economic and social inequality. Only a feminist analysis that holds these dimensions together can address the full architecture of food labour's gendered, caste-based, and class-structured distribution in urban India.

This requires moving beyond the household as the primary unit of feminist analysis and attending to the broader political economy of care and domestic labour within which individual households are embedded. The conditions of domestic workers—their wages, legal protections, working hours, and social recognition—are feminist issues as urgently as the mental load of the middle-class professional woman. A genuinely intersectional feminist politics demands that these concerns be addressed together, as dimensions of a single unequal system rather than as separate problems for separate constituencies.

Digital Capitalism and the New Landscape of Food Labour

The rise of platform capitalism within the Indian food economy presents feminist analysis with both new evidence and new challenges. Food delivery platforms such as Swiggy and Zomato, grocery delivery services, and the vast ecosystem of digital recipe content have been widely celebrated as technologies of liberation from domestic drudgery. The evidence presented in this paper suggests a more ambivalent assessment. While these platforms undoubtedly reduce the physical labour of cooking and shopping for those who can afford them, they simultaneously generate new forms of cognitive and managerial labour that fall disproportionately on women, and they do so in ways that are particularly difficult to perceive and name because they are embedded within leisure activities and digital consumption.

Platform capitalism's relationship to food labour is also not neutral with respect to class and caste. The delivery riders who bring food to urban middle-class households are overwhelmingly men from working-class and lower-caste backgrounds, performing precarious gig labour under the algorithmic management of platforms that externalize risk onto workers while capturing value from both ends of the transaction. The domestic workers who cook and clean within those households perform similarly precarious labour with even less legal protection and social visibility. The convenience offered by digital food platforms to urban consumers is therefore built upon a layered structure of exploited labour that feminist analysis cannot afford to overlook.

Moreover, the cultural economy of digital food content—recipe videos, food influencers, domestic perfection aesthetics on social media—actively reproduces and intensifies the ideological pressures surrounding women's food labour. The circulation of images of elaborate home-cooked meals, nutritionally optimized family breakfasts, and festival food preparations on digital platforms raises the cultural standards to which domestic cooking is held, generating new forms of invisible pressure even as they present themselves as aspirational and celebratory. Digital capitalism does not merely reorganize food labour; it actively produces new norms of domestic excellence that intensify the emotional and reputational stakes of women's kitchen work.

Policy Recommendations for Gender-Just Households and Society

The persistence of unequal food labour is not inevitable, and its transformation requires intervention at multiple levels of social organization. At the level of law and public policy, the most urgent priority is the formal recognition and regulation of paid domestic work. India's domestic workers—the majority of whom are women from Dalit and

lower-caste communities—remain largely excluded from the protections afforded to workers in formal employment: minimum wage guarantees, social security coverage, regulated working hours, and legal recourse against abuse and exploitation. The enactment and enforcement of comprehensive domestic worker legislation, building on the framework of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention (Convention No. 189), is a necessary foundation for any serious feminist politics of food labour in India.

At the level of social infrastructure, investment in affordable, accessible, and nutritionally adequate community food provision—community kitchens, subsidized canteens, expanded mid-day meal programmes—would reduce the total burden of household food labour while simultaneously addressing nutritional inequality. Urban planning that integrates food infrastructure into the design of residential areas, reducing the time and effort costs of food procurement, represents a further structural intervention. Expansion of quality, affordable childcare—which directly reduces the interdependence of childcare and cooking labour that intensifies women’s domestic burden—is among the most important policy levers available.

At the level of education and culture, curricula that challenge the naturalization of food labour as feminine duty, and that engage boys and men as active participants in domestic food management from an early age, are essential for long-term cultural transformation. Public discourse that names and values the mental load—that makes visible the planning, coordination, and emotional management work that underpins every shared family meal—contributes to creating the conditions under which redistribution can be demanded and negotiated. Feminist advocacy organizations, trade unions, and civil society actors have a vital role to play in sustaining this discursive work alongside campaigns for structural change.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that domestic food labour constitutes a critical yet persistently undervalued form of reproductive labour that sustains both the household and the wider economy while simultaneously reproducing gender inequality within society. By situating kitchen work within wider systems of gender, capitalism, caste, and social reproduction, it has sought to render visible the hidden labour that continues to sustain everyday social life while remaining largely unrecognized within dominant economic and sociological frameworks. Drawing on feminist, Marxist, socialist, radical, and intersectional theoretical perspectives, the paper has demonstrated that food labour is not simply the act of cooking but a multi-dimensional form of work encompassing physical, cognitive, emotional, and cultural labour—each dimension invisibilized through distinct but mutually reinforcing mechanisms of patriarchal ideology, capitalist organization, and cultural naturalization.

In urban India, this labour is shaped by the intersection of patriarchal ideology, caste-based prescriptions, class inequality, regional food traditions, and the particular tensions of neoliberal modernity in which women are simultaneously positioned as professionals and as primary custodians of household nourishment. The double burden experienced by urban professional women is not a temporary transitional problem that will resolve itself with further modernization; it is a structural feature of a social order that continues to assign reproductive labour to women while expanding their productive obligations without a corresponding redistribution of domestic responsibility. Recognizing this structural character is the necessary precondition for any serious response to it.

The sociology of food has a crucial role to play in rendering invisible labour visible—in making legible the work that sustains daily life and that is systematically attributed to natural feminine care rather than to skilled, effortful, and socially consequential labour. As Federici (1975) argued five decades ago, the first step toward transforming the conditions of domestic labour is refusing the naturalization that makes it invisible. The recognition that food labour is work—real, skilled, economically significant, and unjustly unequally distributed—is the foundation upon which any meaningful politics of gender equality in the domestic sphere must be built. In India, where this recognition must simultaneously confront caste hierarchy, class exploitation, and the seductive promises of digital capitalism, the task is both more complex and more urgent than elsewhere. This paper is offered as a contribution to that recognition and to the broader sociological and political project of making the ordinary labour of everyday life visible, valued, and equitably shared.

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