

# KITCHEN, FOOD AND GENDER IDENTITY: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY AMONG BRAHMANS WOMEN IN KATHMANDU VALLEY

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## Abstract

In the literature on household-gendered work, women are conceptualized as 'producers' while men are conceptualized as 'consumers' of women's services. Rather than contesting this argument, this paper shows that food may be used for an unlimited of purposes, whether to resist, exercise, change, express, or even reinforce the sexual division of labor. Specifically, conversations with 20 middle-class Brahman women residing in Kathmandu Valley show that they derive personal gains from food preparation as it facilitates the construction of gender and class identities. Although, women's attitudes and practices generally reproduce the dominant gender ideology they do not perceive food making as a form of gender subjugation since this role is colored by how the 'self' is constructed. Furthermore, women view this role to be a significant cultural value, which may be continuously adapted, reproduced, modified, revived, recreated, and elaborated in whichever, they feel happy and benefit from the situation.

**Keywords:** Food, Household, Gender Identity, Power

## Introduction

This article investigates women's perception on their stereotype traditional identity as cooks at the household level. Some theorist claims that cooking is service work women perform not for themselves but only for the needs of others, notably men (Murcott 1995). In the collection of literature on gender work in the household women are conceptualized as 'producers' while men are conceptualized as 'consumers' of women services (Gershuny, 1983). It is not my aim here to contest this frequently stated argument but rather to add that in culturally specific circumstances, women can be seen to use for an unlimited of purposes whether to resist, maneuver, change express, and even reinforce the dominant gender ideology. Here I address the plausibility of women deriving personal gain from cooking to achieve their ends. In such a case woman who

cook and serve meals are not necessarily mere 'producers' in the production process of goods, implying their role in cooking is carried out as service for others.

For many foods is a tool they creatively 'consume' -in a symbolic sense- as it can be manipulated according to the wishes of these women and cooking is conceived as a means for creating their identity as women of a specific class rather than a chore that is dutifully fulfilled (Devasahayam, 2005). Thus, in cooking, it may be said that 'producing is a way of consuming'. In other words, through giving of themselves in cooking, women are securing gains for themselves.

This paper is part of my PhD thesis, fieldwork conducted in urban Nepal. I am concerned with the middle-class Brahman family, exercising power and achieving pleasure in the everyday practice of cooking while creating a gender identity specific to their class status. In Nepal, women do not share a confined identity, rather class, religion, and so forth color their identity as women, as such, for Brahman women there is no 'essence' for gender laid down by 'tradition' as it were but only that which is repeatedly (re) creation at every moment, implying a more fluid and subjective conception of their identities as women. For this reason, I use the term 'gender identities' throughout this paper. I find this phrase to be more accurate as it implies a "plurality and difference without abandoning the notion that gender does play a part in constituting the subject" Marshal ((1994.P.112).

The sample of Brahman women for this research consisted of twenty housewives and working women, the latter group of women come from professionals, business, and civil service backgrounds. The women with whom I worked do not perceive their role as providers of food as oppressive but rather have made active choices within the parameters of their cultures. their perceptions stem from how the 'self' is constructed that is fluid and unbounded and, thus decisions for others are synonymous to decisions made for themselves. Kitchen, food, and women's roles are interrelated. The kitchen and women's role has taken a back seat. It is even often overlooked and may be deemed unimportant. There is no any anthropological research on this integral part of culture and everyday practice. So, this paper will be more helpful and a milestone for future researchers who are interested in the anthropology of food and kitchen because the kitchen and cooking are culturally significant and where important interaction takes place (Chua and Rajah 2013), this paper shows that it is more than a place to prepare an everyday meal.

## Study area and research methods

The research from which this paper emerged was carried out in the Kathmandu valley of Bagmati district, the capital city of Nepal. Baneshwor, and Koteswor warda no. 32 was my study area. Primarily, this research is a qualitative data-based ethnographic study. I used the traditional fieldwork methods such as participant observation, the conventional mode of interaction, informal interview, and general kurakani with the women of the Brahman social group to generate the required data for the study.

Participants (20) were selected by purposive sampling method. Women were anticipated to be the main family food preparer. Interviews were conducted with the Brahman women of Kathmandu Valley; the age groups were from 25 to 55 from the different status groups (age, education, profession). Women are differentiated as *sasu*, *Buhari*, and *chhori*, these different groups perform different roles and responsibilities and face different challenges and experiences as primary cooks at the household level. I interviewed these groups of women separately to grab the different experiences and perceptions at the household level.

Most interviews were about 60 minutes in length. Detailed field notes were written after each interview and the interview was transcribed verbatim. To analyze the data, I was reading and reading each transcript related to the main theme, comparing and contrasting across participants.

## Analysis and discussion

### Contemporary definition of gender identity in terms of food

The dominant gender ideology for the Nepali Hindu Brahman women stems from a religious doctrine that specifically marks a woman's place in the household and society at large. The ideal notion of what it means to be a 'good' woman emphasizes selfless devotion, obedience, and loyalty to one's husband (Waldey, 1988). DeVault (1910) suggests that engaging in domestic tasks can be seen as a woman not only fulfilling a female role but also actively endorsing, on a day-to-day basis, her gender identity. Preparing food is a principal way in which Brahman women relate to others and define themselves. As my informant Bhawani said, "I'm a housewife. If I do not know how to cook, what's left". This skill as a good cook is acclaimed and appreciated by family and friends. Sumina said how much she enjoyed "the satisfaction of seeing that you make something that others like". Ajanta (my relative) explained that-

"Cooking was the greatest satisfaction (Khushi in her words) that I had because I loved to make delicious food with whatever I had. I found satisfaction for myself and

for the family." Dedication to home and family has always been a fundamental part of Brahman womanhood.

Women continue to take charge of certain activities within the household that are most connected to a woman's gendered identity. i.e., cooking, cleaning, and washing dishes. As a woman in her early 50s, (housewife) Laxmi remarked that

Of course, a woman should be the one to cook. if she plans the cooking, she should cook why not a man, you may ask? Nepalese society, especially Brahmins always expects women to do the cooking.

The task of managing food has become part of the commonsense framework of some women who connect cooking with their identity as women. A housewife/ teacher in her late 30s (Sumina), said.

If a woman is a wife and mother, she should keep something on the table that she cooks every day for their family. Everyday cooking in the home is still women's work, women themselves perceive this food as closely related to femineity and the subjective expression of being a woman.

A successful businesswoman of 46 years Karishma said that.

Women are attached to cooking. It is the identity of being a woman, even if men can cook, it's more women's work.

According to the provision of food on a day-to-day basis, the buying, and storing of food, preparing it for cooking, the physical act of cooking itself, setting the seats, serving the food, and washing up after meals is mostly described as a woman's work. The attitude is not different for working women. Although, they feel the combined pressure of cooking with career demands and household management caring for the family and taking charge of the home is still their primary concern. The majority of Hindu Brahman women with whom I interviewed continue to cook, feeling that it was their responsibility and not their husband's to do so. A Dentist in her early 40s (Ahusha ) who depends heavily on her assistance ( Maid), when it comes to cooking said that

It may not be important for a woman to do the cooking as such but yes to manage the cooking is necessary. She needs to know how to cook in our society. As a Nepalese wife, mother, and daughter-in-law, it is very important because my husband does not cook. I also feel very good, looking at my children's eating when I have prepared for them and the comments that they give me-" Oh Amma! This is very nice" encourage me to cook.

The kinds of foods that appear at the dining table are an indication of the choices a woman makes, and a woman's experience with cooking can be physically framing and time-consuming especially for working women, as an everyday meal in a typical Nepali home can consist of one or two vegetable, Lentil (Dal), pickle (Achar) with rice as the basic starch/ food. Middle-class Hindu women differ from the women of lower classes, especially in their everyday routine. Besides being educated, these women have wider interests due to their urban experience and class status. In addition to their work, many women talked about spending time reading a book, attending courses, as well as becoming involved in social work. They also mentioned embarking on a degree by taking evening classes, going to the health club, and meeting up with friends. In an urban area, women spend a short time in the kitchen, whether the family eats out or brings food home from out. Even if they are tired or do not have sufficient time, especially among women who have neither a helper nor an elder relative (A mother, or mother-in-law), convenience foods are an attractive option for a 'quick meal'. This trend is becoming increasingly common from the fact that the foods are easily available in an urban area if you order food it comes within one hour to our doorsteps. By these convenience foods in the home, the working woman creates meanings related to her new ideology as a worker whose time spent at home is diminished considerably. Otherwise, full-time housewives spent more time cooking and taking care of home and family members.

Mostly Brahman man may contribute to the process of meal production, by buying food and by helping his wife in the kitchen. This is always, almost done under the instruction of their wives. When it comes to cooking, however, husbands are never expected to cook. A housewife Nirmala 52 years lady had this to say.

I will never leave the cooking to my husband even if he can cook. As a mother, I know what my husband and children like and how they like it prepared, my husband does not know these things. Perhaps because as a husband and a father, he does not see these things as his responsibility.

In the households where the woman is working, however, I found that many husbands especially the younger, may help in the initial preparation or they help to cook if they like or want to share with their wives in the kitchen. They help with cutting vegetables and washing dishes, even if they want to share cooking equally. In urban areas, especially if there are husbands and wives they work together. Mostly when the men are alone and unmarried, they cook themselves. But for a married man and a man who lives with their parents, it depends upon their mood. A 37-year-old government officer Kalpana said...

I prefer to cook. I feel comfortable cooking for my family. My husband wants to take over but it is a part of my role as a mother, wife, and daughter-in-law. A woman should know how to cook. I think both boys and girls should know how to cook. I taught my son to cook, he is interested. Nowadays, both husband and wife's responsibilities are to take care of the home, and his wife may want him to cook once in a while. And what if he goes overseas to study? They may not have a helper cooking for them. He may need to cook.

Although women welcome their husband's occasional help in the kitchen and around the house, most women see cooking as their task. Bhagawati, 55 years old, a retired banker, said that

I enjoy cooking and do not mind the responsibility that comes with it. There are some Hindu Brahmins who are helpful, they want to do things for their wives but most Brahmin male members are spoiled by their mothers. In the traditional Hindu Brahmin family, the mother works for her son but the daughter does everything themselves, so when they are married, their wives will do everything for them. This is tradition, this should be changed. they should expect that their son learns to cook one or two dishes, especially for emergencies not for their wives, my husband won't even boil tea if I am not at home.

Responses and attitudes related to food are varied in the different status groups e.g., age. Education, time convenience. Older women are more conservative than younger ones. Here a woman's nurturing and caring aspects are considered female traits that distinguish her from a man. By demarcating their activities and responsibilities in this way, both woman and man are actively creating their distinct gendered identities in the domestic sphere. However, there is social pressure on Hindu Brahmin women to provide a meal for their families inside the house despite working outside the home. This social pressure creates difficult situations, to buy from restaurants or food vendors. Food among Brahmins is intimately linked to home dining home may be reinforced to some degree by the idea that food is invested with sacred quality and must be treated with ritual purity (Dumont, 1970). From my research, I learned that women's experiences with food are multifaceted and activated differently depending upon the varying contexts. In other words, it is more likely that a particular woman may find herself having each of these experiences at varying points in time. In the rest of the paper, I show that women, while reproducing the dominant gender ideology, can and do derive power and pleasure from food provision. Within these positive experiences, women reinforce their gendered identity and their family's socio-economic class status.

## Cooking and power

The Kitchen is the dynamic space that we interact in daily and routinely. When women cook, they hold certain powers of decision-making, in many homes, meals are planned ahead of time. A decision making in food provision includes on one hand, what foods are to be cooked for that day and on the other, the style in which the food is prepared. Women stated that there were times when they sought the preferences of their husbands or children. Other studies focusing on meal preparation in the home stress the inequality felt by women who cooked only those around them, never preparing meals for themselves (Murcott, 1995, Ekstrom. 1991). In my research, I found that women did not just cook for others neither did they cook just for themselves. Some women spoke of cooking various dishes for the choice of family members and themselves as well. Women as a pivotal force in managing food in their home where matters of food are a collective affair. Looking out for the other does not necessarily mean that the woman is at a disadvantage and ultimately exploited by those around her. In the Hindu Brahmins, the 'familial' self (Roland, 19880, p.7) predominates, defined by social relationships within the family structure. Psychoanalyst Alan Roland (1988, pp 7-8) describes the 'familial' self as encompassing symbiosis- reciprocity that involves intensely emotional intimately relationships, with their emotional connectedness, (her) there is a constant affective exchange through permeable actor ego boundaries...when the high level of empathy and receptivity experimental sense of 'self' that is felt to be highly relational in a different social context.

As such, like other women, Hindu Brahman women's personal experience is related to a decision around food consumption seeking the choices of other family members. As the whole act of eating at home is a familial ritual, husband and children are consulted when cooking a meal, and thus the decision of food choices made by the women are not an individual activity and feeding the family activities that encapsulate emotions, expressions, and sentiments of feelings that capture the continuity between 'herself' and 'others' in her family. The decision of food matters is synonymous with decisions made for herself in the household. Here feeding other family members is perceived as a way of "feeding" herself". This idea was echoed by a working woman, Narwada, A high school teacher 46yrs old...said that

I prefer to have some things simple. I don't like to spend too much time having a very good meal, I am not happy when I am the only one who enjoys food. I feel selfish when my husband and son are not with me and I'm enjoying the food alone. I only cook something special when children and my husband are around me. If there is a little favorite dish left, neither of us take it but we will give it

to our children. we'd say "Never mind' we will eat whatever there is like rice or something.

Many women also have the power to decide what to cook and how to cook and serve in most of the families in urban Areas in middle-class families of Brahman. Women can eliminate unhealthy food from their everyday meal pattern of the family diet. They also decide the frequency in which convenience food should be consumed-rice is regular food in Nepalese kitchens: there is the choice of other food items/dishes. Most of the women with whom I was interviewed replied that the decision to cook food is their personal decision which meets the 'interest of other household members specifically in joint discussions with senior members' mother-in-law/ mother. Kitchen and cooking are a domain controlled by a woman and this is an a Still and until, in many homes, it is not uncommon that the senior person who handled the kitchen does not like to be replaced by others, they think that if they transfer the kitchen to their daughter-in-law, they may be powerless at home, if they cannot handle cooking at least want to serve themselves for other household members at least a main meal.

I found great hope in the newly married 31 years old Anshu, a banker who told me that

The kitchen is the one place my mother-in-law does not feel dispossessed. She draws her power from being the one who feeds the family and thereby the one who safeguards the health of everyone. It's tough to negotiate the space because the boundaries are invisible and I would rather not cross that. While I like cooking, I do not want to turn it into a power struggle. I deeply value my mother-in-law and when we have left the kitchen at night, we do have long conversations about life, and her journey, and I am getting to know her and understand her. But for the time being, I am happy to be an assistant to my mother-in-law by helping her to clean and chop, she does cook.

Many Brahman women in Nepal are organized around the extended family. In many of these homes, it is not uncommon that the older relative, usually the mother or mother-in-law, does the cooking or observes it, she is the focal person of food provision while the younger woman plays a supportive role by assisting. In some cases, misunderstandings can and do arise. The mother-in-law may dictate the food habits of the family, but the young generation of women wants to enjoy new foods while her mother-in-law insists on traditional foods every day. The respondent's opinion is that whoever provides and controls matters concerning food (which includes how foods are to be cooked) is linked to the power a woman wields. A housewife of 45 years Nirmala also spoke of power when it comes to cooking in the home. She explained it in this way:



Managing food in the home is one way a woman asserts her power, but I think like a man, a woman also likes having some territory. It's the same with both men and women, they want more and more they are never satisfied with this is power over other people and it is human nature that shows up also in the domain of food management at home.

In these cases, a woman derives satisfaction from the fact that she is the primary decision-maker or provider of the meal. The women with whom I was working accept that, at least kitchen and cooking are their own space, they do not like the interference of others.

### **Cooking and pleasure**

A woman can also find herself in a situation where she wants to expect her creative spirit through cooking and thus, need not necessarily, produce a meal for the satisfaction of others around her or by the ideology of food as a 'gift'. Many women enjoy cooking, seeing it as truly a work of 'creativity'. Each meal is a unique artistic creation; the combinations of the meal can be varied depending on her moods and emotions at that time/moment. Although a meal can be repeated, the exact taste and flavor of each dish can never be entirely replicated over time. Many women with whom I spoke described the joy they received from expressing their creativity through food making. A young woman in her early 30<sup>th</sup> expressed her enjoyment of the aesthetic process of cooking in this

I read somewhere about an Indian proverb that says "If you are not pretty, use turmeric, if you are not a good cook, use tamarind", cooking is like mathematics it is also an intellectual hobby, it is a way of expressing yourself; your likes dislikes.

Here cooking need not be only a practical exercise but one that involves the intellectual capacities of the cook. As stated by feminist philosopher Lisa Heldke (1992, p.203) food making can be although full practice, indeed given the careful choice of cooking method to be employed, the judicious use of ingredients that go into a dish, the skillful control of heat and the moment at which the food is to be displayed depending on the status of dinners.

With every meal or dish, a woman makes numerous culinary choices-aesthetic, technical, and social. Food is not only filling our stomachs it is also performative and creative work, taste, color, and combination of ingredients are arranged structurally. When women make food from fresh ingredients, it is not difficult to see cooking as a creative process, here food making is like art. The foods are raw materials like a

lump of clay which she then sculpts with her hands, in this context, Usha, a beautician explained that;

I think, presenting and serving the food is important. I make particular when we have guests for an everyday meal, it's not so important. My actual cooking is that when I feel creative and spend more effort on it.

Creative cooking frequently occurs during the weekend when working women have more time or the housewife also is not in a hurry to feed household members for outgoing work. They have more and more time to elaborate meals, and they can use their special skill related to food. The weekend meal is the 'special meal' when something different than the usual everyday dishes is prepared. The weekend meal in many Brahman families may constitute a change from the daily -rice, dal, vegetable, and pickle which is common in Nepal. In most Nepalese kitchens rice is compulsory, there may be varieties of vegetables, meat, and pickle. They can make other foods like bread, noodles, and Momo on a weekend dinner. On the weekend when a working woman is not pressed for time, she has time and a chance to present her creativity.

Sumina, a 35 years old lady of housewife says

I am a housewife, but my husband and my father-in-law go to the office early in the morning, so I cannot think more about extra and creative food. I prepare plain rice, but on weekends I have time and a chance to make an extra meal, so I usually make delicious food and want to make more effort to show my creativity to make them happy through food. I like cooking, it's a pleasure for me.

Cooking is such a simple action that creates great change through our use and consumption of food. So cooking is a creative work in which women always feel pleasure and resourcefulness. Many women spoke of cooking something special depending on their mood or if they were inspired to experiment with new or expensive foods. It is on such occasions that women open recipe books or attempt a recipe given to them by a friend or by their mother. This was also the time when women paid more effort to the requests of their husbands or children or entertained guests with a home-cooked meal. Thus, these women derived satisfaction within the parameters of their social and cultural circumstances, that is, from their role as cooks.

That a woman treats cooking as an art and derives pleasure from cooking may still be the case when she uses convenience foods. Brahman women also enjoy cooking. In Nepal, there is no variation in cooking in Brahman's home. Middle-class families especially in urban areas, sometimes try Western food, Nepalese kitchens are more

impressed by Indian dishes also so they make samosa, chat, and Briyani for their family members in special request. Nowadays going out for dinners and snacks ( Khajaa in Nepali) is common in Nepalese society. However, emotion is not there when women invest emotions in their self-prepared foods. The fact is that she has prepared the meal with love and care, which further transforms the mass-produced object into a personal "gift" (Lupton, 1996). Following French Sociologist Marcel Mauss's (1967) thesis on gifts, convenience food now encapsulates something of the identity of the donor and, in this case, the women however, it is the context and ways in which gifts are presented with appropriate sentiments that strips the gift of its commodity identity enable it to convey instead the givers' identity.

However, this gift is not a gift in a true sense; there is no spirit of reciprocity. The very act of cooking a meal for one's husband, children and family is an expression of "selfless" display Lupton (1996, p.47), and the gift here in the form of food, is a 'powerful' sign of love that encompasses allegiance, benevolence, commitment, delight sacrifice, satisfaction, and unity. Although this gift is never presented with the intention of it being reciprocated in any way, there are non-material and intangible returns in the form of affection and gratitude conveyed to the giver. A strong emotional dimension emerges when a woman is unhappy or upset if the food is refused, or when there is a great delight in her food. Through this process, a woman becomes the centrifugal force of love at the familial level.

Anthropologist R. S Khare's (1976, p.253) comments (although referring to Tamil of South India) apply to the Brahman women who describe the product of the skill of women in the kitchen as "a taste that comes from the hands of those who are socially and emotionally near...". In the case of daily food, the mass-produced food product can be converted into an emotionally charged object when it passes through the hands of the woman. Having incorporated part of herself into the end product (Lupton, 1996) that embodies the emotions, she not only derives pleasure from preparing the dish but from being her husband, children, and relatives content with what she has produced. A woman of 46 years old Sharmila who is a government officer with whom I interviewed, put it this way—

“I enjoy praise when I have cooked a good meal, I think it is important for me. It motivates me as a responsible woman, it deeply satisfies me.”

Another Brahman woman 50 years old said that—

As a wife and mother, I feel happy when I watch them, enjoying the food I have cooked. When my children have a favorite food, whatever it may be, I keep it, especially for them. It is a joy to see them eat what they like.

A housewife of 37 years Anjana said that—

I never feel oppressed and bored in cooking. food is unlike the power of achieving status. In power and status, it is always something enough but with food, you can never get "enough", you can eat and eat as there is a limit as to how much your stomach can take in, So when I cook, I make sure that what I have produced is always the best in terms of taste and quality, and only then I may be happy so that when my family members have eaten, they can say that they have "enough" in that they are satisfied.

Food in this context is bound up with relationships and kin attachments unlike "eating out" where food is a commodity to be sold and bought. From the above, we can see that the woman is in control of the 'consumption as much as the 'production process. There is a sense of joy a woman feels when she cooks a dish that is liked by the members of the family for her effort has brought on positive effects. However, a few women in the sample rejected what they saw as the oppressive gender role of cooking. Most expressed great interest and enthusiasm in cooking. They did so in ways that empowered them and asserted their agency. In many instances, the women viewed the kitchen and cooking as a time for celebration, self-esteem, satisfaction, and creativity.

## Conclusions

Even though large numbers of middle-class Brahman women are housewives. They continue to cook for their families. The women continue to sustain this pattern joining with the dominant gender ideology that ascribed certain tasks to women such as housekeeping, cooking, and taking care of the children while men take care of other responsibilities connected to the home. Although their attitude in practice reproduces the dominant gender ideology, generally middle-class Brahman women do not perceive food provision as a form of female subjugation by men since their role in food provision encompasses cultural values that are not perceived as oppression. From the perspective of the critical outsider, these women can be seen as trapped by the false notion that their ideal place is in-home, and to manage activities like cooking.

My purpose in discussing women and food provision in the house is not to counter-hegemonic construction but to point out such everyday practices from which women derive personal gain. The perception of women in the domestic sphere is different from people's perceptions outside the home. In a time of rapid social and economic change, a woman may assert her shifting gendered identity by reinforcing the current gender

paradigm identity by modifying it. For example, they can hire assistance for household work, by which She gains the freedom to spend more time on other activities inside and outside the home. Hence, although it may be the case that these women are forced to reproduce cultural values without having any recourse. As such women may also resist the dominant gender ideology should they opt. not to cook, or not cook delicious foods, but their necessarily transforming social expectations entirely.

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