



### **Nutrition and gender [lecture]**

*Summary of different specialist articles by Gaby Beckmann*

#### **Putting coherencies into view**

The topic of nutrition is very well suited as an introduction to understanding the practical uses of gender mainstreaming; because, nutrition (and therefore also health) and gender are subject to diverse social construction processes that are reflected in individual behavioural patterns and integrated in social structures. Research of gender aspects in nutrition is still very young, which is somewhat surprising, because eating and drinking belong to the most frequent everyday activities. The notion that it might conceal gender aspects occurs to us at the latest when we become aware of the often differing distinctions in diet behaviour in women and men.

Gender research in the field of nutrition is impressive and convincing because it brings fundamental conditions of human co-existence into view: just as society relies on generative reproduction to secure its survival, human beings have to eat to survive on a physical level. Both arise from the nature of life. But how nutritional requirements are satisfied and how the relationship of the genders are linked to each other, and are directly associated to generative reproduction, is not naturally inevitable. On the one hand, cultural and social rules determine the gender order, on the other hand they define what and how we eat and drink. Both control systems are so closely enmeshed in the nature of human beings that they appear to be "the most natural thing in the world" and therefore quickly disappear from sight. The gender order in particular, but also the organisation of eating - how woman/man should nourish themselves - are interpreted as naturally inevitable. Therefore, what has made them into what they are culturally and socially, is often misjudged.

#### **Gender ingredients**

On closer scrutiny food, food habits, nutritional styles, attitude to nutrition and even locations of consumption have gender connotations. On the one hand, these aspects of nutrition are attributed to one gender. On the other hand, nutrition also offers - similar to fashion - a very large field for intentional and aimed gender staging. Masculinity or femininity are fashioned, experienced and attributed by means of the topic of food and drink. Food habits are also showing evidence of gender.

Nutrition doesn't only happen on a behaviour and expectation level, and it therefore represents an especially intensive form of gender creation. In addition, it also occurs on a direct, physical level, because what we eat and drink affects the male or female body. Last but not least, nutrition has emotional aspects because we feel what we eat and drink immediately, and its consequences. Nutrition also has a level of power in the creation of gender hierarchies that is vital but of which we are barely conscious.

#### **Food habits and body**

To a great degree, feminine socialisation is concentrated on the body and its manipulation whereas a more performance-oriented, instrumental body use is conveyed to boys. Eating habits linked to it and satisfaction with their own body, clearly mark gender differences. Gender is created, presented to oneself and others through female or male nutritional strategies. Roughly generalised: „Women abstain and men indulge". Men tend to pay more attention to what they enjoy; women pay more attention to the amount of calories and health value of food. Food abstinence is generally defined as



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feminine behaviour. Devouring large amounts of food or eating quickly is generally interpreted as masculine behaviour. Sipping at a glass of wine is usually associated with femininity - hasty drinking straight out of a bottle is usually a sign of masculinity.

**Experiments have shown that a woman who doesn't eat much during meals, comes across as being particularly feminine. She seems more attractive, better looking and more emotional than when she "digs in" ("like a man").**

These attributions obviously do not function only on a level of behaviour that can be directly observed, but also on a deeper level of normative expectations. Test persons who had to allocate the leftovers from meals eaten to fictive men or women, reached a unanimous result: according to their estimates, plates that had a lot of leftovers on them had been eaten by women – plates with small amounts of leftovers had been eaten by men. After the classification it came as a surprise to the test persons that the amount of leftovers on all the plates was the same. *(Although men and women do the same, it is not necessarily the same thing!)*

Having an open attitude towards the issue of nutrition is putting it on the same level as femininity, whereas masculinity usually means ignoring nutritional recommendations and putting the focus on indulgence. Unhealthy food habits also fit in the traditional concept of masculinity.

**Concise differences in food habits:**

Women	Men
Eat healthier, consume fresh fruit and vegetables more frequently, milk products; reach for more wholefood products and raw vegetables; are more frequently vegetarians.	Show a higher rate of consumption of high energy foods; eat larger amounts of meat (red meat in particular), cold cuts and alcoholic beverages;
On average they have a better knowledge of nutrition; healthy nutrition plays a vital role in the health concepts of women.	Acting in conformity with social ideas about "gender adequate behaviour" men sooner consider movement and sports to be the most important health promoting factors.

**Social construction of gender and cultural arrangement systems offer a model here: masculine meat hunger – feminine tendency to vegetable foods.**

Women	Men
Moderation, abstinence, control.	Carefree, large helpings, fast eaters, able to hold their drink
Unwomanly: hasty drinking straight out of a bottle, consumption of red steaks, taking a hearty bite into a fatty joint.	Unmanly: sipping from a glass, eating a carrot during a coffee break

**Consumption situations are gender-coded:**

Women	Men
Coffee party	Regular's table at the local pub

**Methods of preparation also reveal gender distribution:**

Feminine fields of competence	Masculine
Baking, cooking, and stewing (unpaid feeding of the family; lovingly prepared meals as a symbol of feminine care is an indicator for successful femininity).	Barbecues (adventure, freedom); professional cooking (top performance) Admirer from others (cooking for special occasions, parties).

**Tastes and meals with gender image:**

Feminine	Masculine
Mild, light, soft = attributes that serve the feminine taste	Bitter, dark chocolate ( <i>Herrenschokolade</i> )
Pears Helene, Crepe Suzette, <i>errötendes Mädchen</i> (blushing girl)	<i>Holzfallersteak</i> (lumberjack steak), <i>Jägerschnitzel</i> (hunter's cutlet), ham, cheese and egg sandwich ( <i>strammer Max</i> )

Meat is regarded as masculine to the same extent that it (meat) is eaten conspicuously often and in large amounts by men. The consumption of meat is viewed as masculine behaviour and has a corresponding significance in the creation of masculinity. It projects gender affiliation. That is: meat and alcohol consumption are trappings of masculinity, whilst dietary restraint is a gender creating practice of femininity. Both behavioural patterns – alcohol consumption in boys, diet frequency in girls – skyrocket when they reach puberty.

**Emotions: Masculine pleasure principle, feminine frustration principle**

Various studies point out that schoolchildren in early adolescence already show signs of distinct gender specific traits in their eating behaviour. Boys emphasise that they feel especially good and fit after a meal. They say that they are willing to drop everything for a good meal. At an early age girls are already dominated by negative feelings such as fears and worries in connection with food. Food is seldom a source of pleasure and well-being; instead it often presents a potential threat that must be handled with special care and control. Domestic upbringing encourages boys to give free rein to their appetite, eat large helpings, and empty their plates. Boys who eat a lot and enjoy eating are considered healthy. Girls are seldom praised as good eaters; they are confronted with regimented interventions instead. Pleasure of eating and autonomous taste preferences soon take a back seat.

This behaviour is schooled and continues into adulthood. To a great degree (75%) men allow their food habits to be solely guided by their taste. They connect food intake with feelings of satisfaction, joy, well-being, independence and autonomy (by ignoring dietary recommendations). The gender-specific coding of feelings reads as follows: it is masculine not to yield to power and not to be fearful. Women on the other hand show an almost opposite ratio: In surveys, half the women link food with control and only one fourth will follow their own taste. The emotional access to food tends to be ambivalent in women: intellectual and emotional associations such as lack of appetite *and* attractiveness, desire to control *and* feelings of fear can cause them to experience the pleasure of eating as failure, which is acknowledged with negative feelings such as shame or guilt.



## Nutrition and Power

Not only the practical activity – how and what and where I eat – but also the power relationships that are associated or ascribed to it are created through food, cooking methods, places of consumption

etc. Typically "masculine" and typically "feminine" foods are classified either as "strong" or "weak". It is certainly not surprising that foods with a feminine connotation tend to have the "weak" quality: quark, fruit, vegetables, sweet desserts are mild, light, soft. They can be consumed without using much strength (chewing, swallowing) because they hardly offer any physical resistance. On a social interpretation level, feminine foods possess "gentle", "healthy", or "indulgent" properties, and are a suitable diet for children, the elderly and invalids.

Masculine foods are considered strong: "hefty", "heavy" are properties that dominate here because the classification deals with spicy, bitter, sour, strongly spiced foods as well as hard liquor. They have an irritating effect on the mucous membranes, and offer resistance during consumption (as for example meat), require a vigorous bite and have a high energy composition.

This kind of cultural appraisal is not only about simple and value-free differences, they express hierarchy relationship instead. In many societies, meat consumption is the predominant form of nutrition, whereas vegetarian fare is put on a level with low (social) statute. Maybe this is what men's fear of losing "masculinity" when they restrain from eating meat derives from.

## Outlook

Nutritional strategies reproduce the gender order. This is why whoever develops concepts for gender-equitable health promotion and prevention in the field of nutrition and wants to ensure the successful implementation of practical programmes, will have to take these findings into account. In Germany "overweight children and adolescents" is a topic that is currently continually on the political agenda, without taking these gender analyses into account.

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