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Why urban food system transformation requires a feminist approach

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Abstract

We argue for a feminist approach to transforming urban food systems, emphasising the crucial role that women, particularly from marginalised communities, play in food security. Despite making significant contributions, women often face systemic barriers and discrimination in urban food governance, not least because much of their work in caring for family members is rendered invisible. We stress the need to incorporate care work into food system designs and to establish physical spaces for community engagement and collaboration. The recent HLPE-FSN 19 report by the UN Committee of Food Security (CFS) entitled “Strengthening urban and peri-urban food systems to achieve food security and nutrition, in the context of urbanization and rural transformation” inadequately addresses the marginalisation of women in urban and informal food systems. Women’s contributions to food security need to be more fully considered in CFS policy recommendations. In this essay, we propose that urban commons – community-managed spaces for resource sharing and decision-making – could help to ensure that care work is more visible and valued. In focusing on the intersection of gender, care, and food security, we call for systemic changes and structural support for women-led community initiatives, which are essential for addressing food insecurity and related challenges in urban contexts.



Women protesting against GBV on the streets of Cape Town.
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Introduction

A feminist approach to transforming urban food systems emphasises the need to tackle the intersecting inequalities that exist within cities. A feminist approach not only acknowledges the crucial roles played by women, particularly those from marginalised communities, in managing crises, it also highlights the systemic challenges they face in cities and urban food systems designed under capitalist and patriarchal norms (Kern 2021). Despite making vital contributions to food security, women often encounter significant barriers and discrimination when seeking to impact the governance processes that directly affect their lives (Tripp 2013). As global crises – such as wars, economic recessions, and climate change – cast their long shadows, people continue to struggle with local issues that perpetuate poverty and food insecurity (OXFAM, 2023). Examining these polycrises through a feminist lens reveals how intersecting factors like gender, race, religion, class, and location influence food security.

Urban Food Futures research reveals that women and marginalised communities bear the brunt of the burden of the polycrisis (Paganini & Khan 2023). Food insecurity is higher among women. Women also need to apply more coping strategies to put food onto the table and, at the same time, they must act as stalwarts and leaders in their communities, acting as frontline caregivers to those who require support in community kitchens, eateries, street stalls, care centres, and response centres for gender-based violence (Paganini & Weigelt 2023).

This opinion brief underscores the critical need for a feminist and intersectional approach to transforming urban food systems ahead of the 52nd Plenary Session of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS 52) in October 2024. TMG Research's Urban Food Futures programme embarked on a series of strategic conversations, recruiting partners at the Regional Dialogue in Cape Town (in February 2024) and at the 68th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) in New York (in March 2024) for our campaign to shift the dialogue at this year's CFS on strengthening urban food systems.

We advocate for:

- ▶ Integrating a feminist perspective to reveal overlooked structural inequalities and spark gender-just transformations in urban food systems.
- ▶ Explicitly including physical care work facilities in the design of urban food systems and incorporating the voices of caregivers into food governance processes to ensure their contributions and connections to local, national, and global networks are valued.
- ▶ Recognising and supporting grassroots initiatives such as community kitchens in Cape Town and community eateries in Nairobi, which are predominantly run by women, and collaborating with governments to ensure these initiatives can sustainably address food insecurity and social needs in crisis-stricken environments.
- ▶ Building community-centred spaces to govern food systems and confront structural inequalities while providing structural and financial resources to support the women who envision, build, and sustain these hubs.

This paper addresses the recommendations of the 2024 report of the UN High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE-FSN) entitled "Strengthening urban and peri-urban food systems to achieve food security and nutrition, in the context of urbanization and rural transformation." (HLPE 2024) We argue that there are two crucial gaps in this report:

- ▶ It fails to critically address intersectionality in general and specifically the fact that women's work in urban food systems is rendered invisible due to deeply rooted structural injustices within our societies.
- ▶ It lacks a strong recommendation to leverage women as change agents in food systems by including them in governance processes and systematically supporting their caregiving roles through financial support.

This raises the question: should those who have been rendered invisible work to make themselves seen or should those in power acknowledge and support their efforts?

This brief begins by summarising the insights of the HLPE on gender inequality, acknowledging the critical role marginalised groups play in resilience to crises. We then move from a local-to-global and global-to-local perspective, presenting two case studies that adopt a feminist perspective on urban food system transformation. Finally, we explore the barriers women leaders face in governance and propose the urban commons as a practical and theoretical framework to overcome invisibility and realise feminist-driven transformation.



Why we need to go beyond the recommendations of the HLPE

The HLPE-FSN reports to the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS), which is the foremost intergovernmental and international platform dealing with food security and nutrition. Its reports are compiled by experts and include several rounds of multi-stakeholder consultations.

As a unique international platform, the CFS brings together governments, civil society, and private-sector actors to coordinate efforts to combat hunger and malnutrition. While its recent report acknowledged gender inequalities, it fell short of offering concrete strategies to address the deeper structural issues perpetuating these inequalities and does not provide a clear pathway for establishing governance structures that can support care systems (HLPE 2024).

The report does touch upon gender-related issues, highlighting how vulnerable groups, particularly women and girls in urban areas, face growing challenges due to the intersections of urbanisation, climate change, and conflict, all of which disrupt food supply chains and exacerbate health and nutritional disparities (HLPE 2024, p. 29). It recognises the crucial roles women play in urban food systems, particularly in production, distribution, and vending, but notes that these contributions are often undervalued, with women receiving fewer benefits and opportunities than their male counterparts (HLPE 2024, p. 34). For example, in the food processing sectors, women are often relegated to lower-wage, insecure positions, while men dominate higher-paying, managerial roles (HLPE 2024, p. 42). Additionally, in traditional value chains and street food vending, women are largely excluded from decision-making processes, receive lower wages, and are more vulnerable to harassment and violence (HLPE 2024, p. 45, p. 49).

While the 2024 HLPE report acknowledges the dimension of gender, we would love to take this further at CFS and engage with the deeper issues of gender justice, particularly the need to incorporate a care perspective into governance and policy-making.

From an intersectional feminist standpoint, it is essential to move beyond simply identifying gender disparities and towards addressing the root causes of these inequalities, which include the devaluation of care work and the unequal distribution of care responsibilities along with weak support systems for caregivers, who oftentimes are also leaders in their communities.

A care perspective would demand that governance and policy frameworks not only recognise but actively include care work as a central component of food systems and urban planning. This involves rethinking how policies are designed and implemented to ensure that they support the unpaid and underpaid care work that predominantly falls to women. It also means advocating for policies that redistribute care responsibilities more equitably between men and women, and between the state and individuals.

Intersectional feminism calls for a recognition of how multiple axes of identity – such as race, class, and ethnicity – intersect to create different experiences of marginalisation. The 2024 HLPE report can be critiqued for its lack of attention to these intersecting factors, which compound the challenges faced by women in urban food systems. We suggest using the report to link the need for urban food system transformation as outlined by HLPE 2024 and to imbue it with an intersectional feminist understanding.

The hidden crisis: The intersection of food insecurity and gender-based violence

Gender equality is crucial to democracy, yet the foundations of democracies globally are under threat due to growing economic disparities, societal and political polarisation, and shrinking civic spaces. If current trends persist, global gender equality may not be realised until the twenty-second century. Between 2019 and 2022, nearly 40 % of countries, home to over 1.1 billion women and girls, saw a stagnation or decline in gender equality (Equal Measure 2024). When zooming in from the global debate sparked by the HLPE report at CFS 2024 to the local contexts of Nairobi and Cape Town, we realise that a frequently overlooked issue in debates and policy is the multifaceted connection – physical, mental, and systemic – between food and violence. The intertwined dynamics of hunger, gender-based violence (GBV) and trauma create a complex web that perpetuates systemic inequalities and hides the suffering of marginalised communities. Women's experiences of food insecurity are intertwined with gender-based violence and exacerbated by global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and local ones such as rising energy prices in Cape Town and mass evictions from informal settlements in Nairobi, all of which have forced women into precarious situations.

Women and girls are often economically dependent on male family members. This heightens power imbalances, and women may be coerced or abused if they challenge the allocation of resources. Women are culturally often primary responsible for managing food and household resources. Frustration with women not playing this role can lead to blame and violence. Stress in households that are food-insecure may contribute to men's misplaced anger and venting of frustration against women and children in the home (Duhaney 2021; Goodman et al. 2009). This is particularly prevalent in highly patriarchal communities.

A situation analysis conducted by the Social Change Assistance Trust (SCAT) in the Northern Cape, South Africa, demonstrated that women and particularly girls can be coerced into transactional sex or other exploitative relationships to access food or money. This is particularly evident where men have a monopoly of social and economic power. Food insecurity can drive families to migrate in search of better living conditions. This is exacerbated by climate change which has affected rural communities' ability to subsist on their land. Lack of experience of living in cities makes women and girls vulnerable to violence and trafficking.

A survey conducted by TMG and FACT showed a clear link between gender-based violence and food insecurity. Individuals facing food insecurity were significantly more likely to experience gender-based violence than those with greater food security. In September 2023, 61 percent of respondents who reported experiencing some form of gender-based violence were from severely food-insecure households, rising to 69 percent by January 2024. The more severe the food insecurity, the greater the likelihood of gender-based violence. Given that two-thirds of households were food insecure in 2023, this correlation highlights an urgent crisis.

Fear of a loss of food and dependence on men can act as a barrier to women seeking help. This means that GBV statistics are not representative of the true situation. This is particularly true in areas where services are limited or inaccessible. Services that respond to GBV are often run by women who have experienced violence themselves. While this means they are sensitive to the issues it can impact on their trauma. Their work is often invisible and unacknowledged, and they do this with limited funding and support.

Community kitchens in Cape Town

An example of how women take on unpaid care work to absorb the shocks of crises are community kitchens in Cape Town. On the outskirts of the city, global crises – such as COVID-19, rising food prices, and climate change – continue to strike hardest at communities on the margins of society, both physically and socioeconomically. Further crises specific to South Africa including high unemployment, gender-based violence, frequent protests, and instable energy supply. These crises either exacerbate food insecurity or are exacerbated by it. Protests such as those by taxi drivers disrupt food supply chains, making it difficult for food to reach the most vulnerable communities, while loadshedding¹ influences the consumption behaviour and eating patterns of individuals and households, particularly those most vulnerable to the impacts of loadshedding. Apart from a high national high crime rate, Cape Town also faces a high level of gang violence and gang-related crimes.

Community kitchens emerged in Cape Town as a mechanism for coping with hunger and food insecurity after the COVID-19 pandemic (Nyaba et al. 2024). They serve both hot and cold (sandwiches) meals to men, women and children within and outside of their communities. Most kitchens serve at least one meal a day and some serve meals from Monday to Friday and may serve thousands of meals a day. Some kitchens work in their respective communities as first responders for survivors of gender-based violence, provide shelter, and engage in other training and awareness programmes. Community kitchens perform an important care role by providing food, education, childcare, and shelter for those in need, thereby filling gaps in the state welfare system. However, this work is not without challenges. These include limited financial resources, which results in volunteers and kitchen operators working without compensation, and lack of suitable space, as most community kitchens operate out of private homes (Paganini & Weigelt 2023).



Volunteers cooking at a community kitchen in Bridgetown, Cape Town. © Sanelisiwe Nyaba

Our theory of change is that community kitchens cannot function in isolation. Collaboration with the state is the most effective means of reducing hunger and food insecurity. Community kitchen volunteers understand the nuances of crises in their communities. This places them in the best position to address them (Nyaba et al. 2024). This brings us back to the critical question: should the burden of visibility fall on the invisible, or should those in power recognise and support their efforts? The community kitchen network embodies this dilemma, raising the question of whether the focus should be on making their work visible or on systemically strengthening the network to support the vital care work it provides.

The two case studies described used feminist approaches to dismantle structural inequalities rooted in systems of oppression. In both cases, making hidden work visible and helping the marginalised find their voices were pathways to transformation.

¹ Load shedding, also known as rolling blackouts, are scheduled power outages designed to prevent overloading the electric grid



An eatery in Mathare, Nairobi.
© William Onura

Community eateries in Nairobi

Nairobi, Kenya's capital, faces interconnected challenges, including heavy traffic congestion, inadequate housing, and poor waste management. High unemployment, especially among young people, leads to economic inequality and social unrest, contributing to crime and insecurity (Omboi 2021). Public health issues are exacerbated by water shortages and food insecurity, while climate change and rising food prices complicate these challenges. The nationwide protests in 2024 disrupted access to essential services and heightened tensions in the city (Accessnow 2024), leading to a further increase in food prices. Deep-rooted cultural norms and socio-economic disparities have entrenched gender-based violence, leading to significant physical and psychological harm to women. Rural-to-urban migration and inadequate housing have fuelled the growth of informal settlements such as Mathare. Corruption and failures of governance hinder service delivery, worsening these challenges. In Kenya, as in most places, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened vulnerabilities. Restrictions aimed at controlling the spread of the disease resulted in work layoffs and business closures (Dasgupta & Robinson 2021). In Mathare, these restrictions left women who relied on casual work at the neighbouring air base without employment. Poverty and associated harsh living conditions pushed girls into commercial sex work for survival (Kanyi 2019), leading to unwanted pregnancies and consequent women-headed families. The recent floods further exacerbated the already precarious living conditions of Mathare residents through displacement and destruction of property (Malowa 2024; Sonntag et al. 2024).

In this challenging environment, community eateries emerged as vital lifelines for the residents of Mathare. Run predominantly by women, they are small, informal food establishments operated by the community. Eateries are more than just food vendors; they serve as essential social support systems for vulnerable people. They provide affordable meals to those who cannot cook at home due to financial constraints, lack of cooking facilities or limited time. Additionally, they provide an informal safety net by offering food on credit as well as caregiving services. Located at roadsides and near residential areas, schools and shops, eateries are accessible to a broad segment of the population, including low-income families and students.

The importance of community eateries is particularly pronounced during crises. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, eateries were vital not only as sources of livelihood but also to ensuring that vulnerable community members, including children, had access to meals. They also play a role in mitigating the effects of food price hikes by offering affordable meal options.

Our theory of change is that if women running community eateries in Mathare are supported to overcome the significant challenges they face, such as financial constraints, regulatory hurdles, and infrastructural inadequacies, then they will be better positioned to help address food insecurity and socio-economic conditions within the community. Currently, these eateries operate on slim profit margins, with limited access to credit due to a lack of collateral. Additionally, legal and regulatory challenges hinder their ability to comply

with health and safety standards, often resulting in tensions with enforcement authorities. Issues such as insecurity, fluctuating customer bases, and poor infrastructure further exacerbate these difficulties (Ahmed et al. 2019).

By providing institutional recognition, improving access to financial resources, and enhancing infrastructure, these enterprises can be empowered to operate sustainably and more effectively. This will, in turn, lead to greater food security and improved livelihoods in the Mathare community, ultimately fostering broader socio-economic development.

From caregivers to changemakers

It is imperative to bring a fresh perspective, specifically using a feminist lens, to the transformation of urban food systems, and insert these into global debates such as at UNCSW 69 or CFS in 2024. As the two case studies from Cape Town and Nairobi show, women play a central role in both caregiving and food-related activities, yet their contributions are often undervalued and unsupported.

The African context provides many examples of women caregivers due to the continent's strong cultural traditions of family and community support, with women playing a central role in both. These efforts brought women into leadership roles, transforming caregiver groups into powerful agents of social change. Shibuye Community Health Workers is a grassroots women-led organisation primarily that focuses on providing care to communities affected by health crises. It also addresses broader challenges, including women's empowerment, healthcare, food security, and climate resilience. The example of Shibuye shows how acknowledging and valuing care work can help address gender injustice by recognising women as both caregivers and leaders in their communities. In African households, women are responsible for providing essential care, including feeding

families and meeting basic needs (Ene-Obong et al. 2017). Women play a key role also in their communities; for instance, in many informal settlements, women have taken charge of community kitchens, social welfare programmes, and cooperative ventures. They are recognised as leaders in crisis management and in building resilience within marginalised communities, despite limited resources. These local leaders are often connected nationally and across the continent.

African women's leadership in civil society also extends to policy influence. Networks such as Huairou Commission or FEMNET (the African Women's Development and Communication Network) and other regional bodies advocate for women's rights via African Union (AU) frameworks and influence national policy decisions. They have pushed for gender quotas in politics, for the implementation of the Maputo Protocol² on women's rights, and for better governance structures that include women's voices in decision-making processes.

There is a lack of political will, insufficient resources, and limited capacity to enforce the principles of the Maputo Protocol and effectively address issues such as gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and women's economic empowerment. Entrenched patriarchal norms within political systems, combined with the absence of institutional mechanisms that integrate caregiving into policymaking, mean that women are generally still underrepresented in formal leadership roles. Even in cases where women achieve positions of influence, the governance systems in place often marginalise care work, treating it as a social issue rather than a critical economic and political concern.

Without actively dismantling barriers and creating inclusive spaces that recognise the value of care work, women will remain on the periphery of governance structures, their leadership overshadowed by institutional limitations. At the global level, there needs to be a shift in how caregivers are viewed; note merely as beneficiaries, but as key contributors to solutions.

² The Maputo Protocol, officially known as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, is an international legal instrument adopted by the African Union (AU) in 2003. It specifically addresses the rights of women and girls in Africa and aims to promote gender equality, protect women's rights, and eliminate discrimination and violence against women. Critics argue that despite the adoption of the Protocol, many African countries have not effectively implemented its provisions.

Caregivers must become active participants in shaping care programmes and policies. An example of this is how the Global Network of Care brought the view of women caregivers to the UNCSW 2024. Despite women caregivers' significant contributions to the wellbeing of communities, they are rarely invited into spaces where policies affecting their work are shaped. This invisibility in decision-making processes is not just a reflection of social bias but a systemic issue that keeps their leadership potential confined to informal, often undervalued spaces. Even when women take on leadership roles in community organisations or civil society, they often face barriers when attempting to influence higher-level governance structures. The result at local, provincial, and national levels is a governance system that overlooks the knowledge and experience of those who are deeply involved in maintaining social webs of care, crisis response, and community development.

Towards urban commons

We would like to come back to the question of whether those who are often overlooked should make efforts to be seen, or if it is rather the duty of those in power to recognise their existence and support their endeavours. We introduce the concept of urban commons here as a means to reimagine the functioning of care work in urban food systems. Urban commons are spaces where community members collectively manage resources, make decisions, and support one another, mirroring the

undervalued care work that is essential to urban food systems – from urban agriculture to community kitchens, informal vending, eateries, and food provision in households.

Urban commons thus provide a theoretical framework and a contribution to the debate to make care work performed by women more visible, valued, and supported. Additionally, the discussion of urban commons offers a potential avenue to address the structural inequalities embedded within urban food systems. As a concept, commons in general challenge capitalist and patriarchal structures, advocating instead for a more community-centred and equitable approach to resource management (Ostrom 1990).

Silvia Federici's research on a feminist approach to the commons (2018) highlights the undervalued labour involved in care work and the need to recognise and redistribute this. Federici's ideas can deepen the discussion on how care work in urban food systems is often invisible and underappreciated, and how reimagining these systems through the lens of the commons can address this.

Federici (2018) argues that community-run place-based food initiatives or urban food commons such as community kitchens and care centres not only ensure that members of the community have dignified access to essential healthy and nutritious food, but also enable community members to collectively make decisions on how this food is produced, procured, prepared, shared, and, potentially, disposed of. Members of



Community kitchen leading GBV advocacy in Cape Town. © Callas Foundation

the community have control over the processes of food production and distribution, rather than being mere passive recipients of charity (Federici 2018). As such, community kitchens and eateries are spaces where the idea of food as commons comes to life, both as a resource and as a governance system.

In the theory of change of the Urban Food Futures programme, we envision urban commons not as static hubs but as spaces and social webs undergoing dynamic processes of communing (i.e. debating, changing and adapting). Commons, therefore, does not refer only to the nature of a resource, but also to the way it is governed through 'commoning', a process in which communities establish their own rules and institutions to use and manage shared resources, and equitably share the benefits derived from these resources as well as the responsibilities associated with protecting and caring for them (Vivero Pol 2013).

Urban commons are often created and supported by people who are deprived of necessary resources and decide to pursue them collectively rather than individually (Anastasopoulos 2021). Commons in urban areas emerge in reaction to and in struggle with multiple factors: firstly, they are enacted in saturated spaces, densely packed with people, competing uses, and capitalist investment (Huron 2015). One example is the community eateries in Mathare, where women have created informal food establishments in response to economic inequality, food insecurity and unemployment. These eateries provide affordable meals, act as social support systems and help residents cope with the impacts of crises like COVID-19, rising food prices, and flooding, all while operating in a dense, underserved urban environment.

Our research has documented the practical potential of the hubs and centres where we were fortunate to collaboratively create knowledge over the last years. Turning coping strategies and community-run initiatives into long-term hubs for change, we must acknowledge that urban commons can only become reality as part of a web of social relations. It is not a 'thing' to be reclaimed, but a social process to be strengthened. Urban commons are not "natural commons" that are situated in cities but rather social processes, collaborative or physical hubs that only emerged because of urban spaces where people and ideas, contestation and innovation meet. The care work that keeps food systems working and surviving in marginalised communities is largely invisible. Our jointly developed argument is that structural change can only happen if governmental support is directed towards these initiatives. It is not the task of those maintaining the urban commons to make their work, the structural injustices and the caring system visible; it is the responsibility of those in power to do so.

About

Urban Food Futures is a Science-with-Society programme. With hubs in Nairobi, Kenya and Cape Town, South Africa, our research is focused on informal settlements and low-income urban neighbourhoods that are largely locked out of formal service provision and governance structures. With informality as the connecting thread, we explore pathways to transform food systems and realise the right to food for all.

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