

New book explores women's complex relationship with food

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Getting dinner on the table every night is a regular challenge for many modern households. Ensuring that each meal is healthy, good for the planet and affordable adds extra weight to a burden that is still primarily shouldered by women, according to a new book by U of T Mississauga sociology professor Josée Johnston.

In a new essay collection, [*Food and Femininity*](#), Johnston and co-author Kate Cairns explore the complex and inseparable connections between food and [women](#)'s view of themselves, especially related to issues of health, weight management, parenting and economic status.

"Despite progress in gender equality, food and femininity are still tightly

interlinked," Johnston says. "Many women connect how they see themselves as women with their ability to perform or engage with food."

Johnston and Cairns interviewed groups of women who were interested in food, including mothers, home cooks and activists who were professionally involved in food issues. "We wanted to figure out how people who are interested in food managed the sometimes-conflicting demands in their daily lives," Johnston says.

Like the clothes we choose or the words we use, we signal our gendered identity through our food choices and the ways we relate to food, Johnston says. "We found there is still a very close connection between women feeling they are succeeding at femininity and succeeding at food. Women still feel primarily responsible for feeding children, for keeping up with the latest health news, for managing meal plans and researching ethical food choices," she says. "Men do get a lot of satisfaction from cooking, but it's not as tied in to their sense of who they are on a wider cultural level," Johnston says. "We haven't seen a shift where this work is seen as essential for men. If they do it, it's seen as a bonus, not a failure if they don't do it successfully."

"We found that women felt scrutinized and judged if they didn't do a good enough job, like knowing about super foods, or they had children who refused to eat certain foods," Johnston says. "A woman who is perceived as overweight is often judged for not being able to manage food. If her child is overweight or packs a lunch of convenience snacks or soda, she's often blamed for not being able to manage food. If the family doesn't come together for a nightly meal, the mother is on the hook."

Many women, regardless of background, also felt they weren't doing enough to make [food choices](#) that were sustainable and healthy for their families and the planet. For women dealing with restricted budgets, the

pressures are even greater. "We talked to women for whom this gold-level standard of mothering and femininity—buying organic milk and having fresh fruits and vegetables—were financially out of reach. They just couldn't afford to do that."

"One woman in one of our focus groups was in a low-income household. She was overweight, and her male partner did all of the food shopping because he said she came home with 'the wrong things.' She felt she was failing, but one thing she did to compensate was to make elaborate bento-box lunches for her son every day. She would post a photo to Instagram and her friends would 'like' the images, which gave her a sense of accomplishment. She wasn't doing everything successfully, but she had an area where she excelled," Johnston says. "It's difficult to walk away from these ideals, because it's where we feel successful or failures as women."

But success with food is also fraught with doubt. "Women also felt judged if they did things at too high a level, and were judged for caring too much about food, such as a strident health nut or an over-protective mother.

Food issues can be intensely emotional for women, Johnston says. "We heard from women who were doing food work at an incredible level, and they still had stress about not doing a good enough job," she says.

"There's a perception that women's work with [food](#) has to be perfect. It has to be healthy and gourmet, and your kids have to eat it, and you have to do it in a way that looks effortless, and you have to be thin."

"There's a thin margin for success—you either don't care enough, or you care too much."

Provided by University of Toronto

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