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Taking cognisance of women's domestic foodwork in the debate on ultra-processed foods

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ABSTRACT

This commentary discusses contemporary debates on ultra-processed foods (UPFs) by foregrounding the largely invisible domain of domestic foodwork. While public health discourse has centred on the nutritional and epidemiological implications of UPF consumption, far less attention has been directed toward the social organisation of the labour required to adopt alternatives. We argue that policy measures designed to reduce UPF consumption through behaviour change frequently rest on the implicit assumption that consumers will readily absorb the additional demands of procuring, preparing, and managing minimally processed meals. Such measures risk intensifying the physical, cognitive, and emotional labour disproportionately carried by women within families, thereby reinforcing existing gender, class, and racial inequalities. Drawing on feminist scholarship and cross-context evidence, we propose the development of policy approaches that address UPF consumption while recognising the gendered organisation of foodwork. These include strengthening public food environments, promoting gender-sensitive and inclusive food literacy initiatives, supporting community-based provisioning, incentivising healthier convenience foods, and regulating corporate strategies that drive UPF consumption. By re-centring foodwork within UPF debates, the paper shows how just and effective interventions require moving beyond individual behaviour change to address the structural conditions shaping diets and domestic labour.

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Introduction

For over two decades now, ultra-processed foods (UPFs) have been at the forefront of public health discourse. Emblematic of today's highly industrialised agri-food systems, their widespread presence in contemporary diets mirrors the expansion of large-scale multinational food processors and supermarket chains in the Global North, structural adjustment reforms introduced in many parts of the world in recent decades, as well as the impacts of financialisation on the food system (Clapp, 2021; Clapp & Scrinis, 2017; Hawkes, 2006; Nestle, 2022; Scrinis, 2016; Stevano, 2025; Wood et al., 2023).

The term UPF, as it is currently understood in policy debates and academic literature, was first proposed by Brazilian Professor Carlos Monteiro and colleagues in 2009, as part of the NOVA classification system, which seeks to classify food products based on the extent and purpose of industrial processing (Monteiro, 2009; Monteiro et al., 2018). According to this framework, UPFs are defined as 'formulations of ingredients, mostly of exclusive industrial use, that result from a series of industrial processes' and contain little to no whole food (Monteiro et al., 2019). In practice, the term is operationalised through the presence of ingredients rarely used in domestic kitchens and/or 'cosmetic additives' (Monteiro et al., 2019). Products classified as UPFs are diverse, including confectionery, cake mixes, packaged snacks, reconstituted meat products, industrially produced breads, breakfast cereals, margarine and spreads,

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prepared sauces, soft drinks (with sugar or artificial sweeteners), and packaged ready-to-heat/eat meals including those sold by fast food outlets, for example (Monteiro et al., 2019). Work by Monteiro and colleagues, as well as many subsequent empirical studies, have shown correlations between the increased consumption of UPFs and the incidence of overweight/obesity, mental ill-health, various non-communicable diseases such as gastrointestinal disorders, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, metabolic syndrome, and certain cancers, as well as an increased risk of all-cause mortality (Elizabeth et al., 2020; Lane et al., 2022; 2024; Monteiro et al., 2011, 2025; Pagliai et al., 2021; Popkin & Ng, 2022). Next to observational studies, the negative health impacts of UPF consumption, relative to minimally processed diets, have also been demonstrated via short-term clinical trials and community trials (Dicken et al., 2025; Hall et al., 2019; Hamano et al., 2024; Preston et al., 2025).

However, since its introduction, the definition of UPFs and the operational relevance of the NOVA classification system have been contested by various scholars (Braesco et al., 2022; Gibney et al., 2017; Mialon et al., 2018; Visioli et al., 2025). A common critique posits that the fundamental concern with many UPFs lies in their suboptimal nutritional profile, characterised by high levels of unhealthy fats, sugars, and salt, and low levels of essential nutrients, rather than the extent of processing per se (Petrus et al., 2021). In line with this perspective, recent work underscores the considerable heterogeneity within the UPF category, with some products – such as sugar-sweetened beverages and processed meats – consistently associated with adverse health outcomes, while others, including whole-grain breakfast cereals, fortified foods, and certain plant-based alternatives, demonstrate neutral or even beneficial associations, challenging the assumption that all UPFs are inherently harmful (Louie, 2025). Relatedly, there is an ongoing debate about the lack of evidence about clear causal mechanisms, and further research is needed to elucidate the exact mechanisms through which UPF consumption leads to detrimental health outcomes (Robinson & Johnstone, 2024). Mialon et al. (2018) and Lauber et al. (2025) document that some researchers who have critiqued NOVA have declared relationships to the food industry which may create conflict of interest. Nevertheless, the criticisms and methodological challenges of NOVA deserve scientific debate.¹

Regardless of the highly politicised debates about the framing of UPFs, the NOVA classification system has garnered significant attention, with some governments targeting UPFs in national dietary guidelines and public policies. Among the most prominent public health interventions that directly and indirectly target UPFs are fiscal policies, notably taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages and other energy-dense, nutrient-poor products (Pereda et al., 2024; Popkin et al., 2021; Valizadeh & Ng, 2024). Similarly, front-of-package (FoP) warning labels have emerged as a prominent tool to steer consumers away from food products high in sugar, saturated fat, sodium or calories, which is the case for many UPFs (Taillie et al., 2020). Reformulation is another intervention that involves levying requirements on manufacturers to reduce quantities of nutrients that are considered to be unhealthy when consumed in excess (Lehmann et al., 2019; Saavedra-Garcia et al., 2022).

Marketing and advertising restrictions based on nutritional profiling of food products are often applied to UPFs and constitute another cornerstone policy (Kent & Pauzé, 2018; Mallarino et al., 2013; Royo-Bordonada et al., 2025). Complementary policies include restrictions on the sale of UPFs within schools and other public institutions. The Brazilian federal school meals legislation that prohibits or limits the offering of UPFs in public schools is an example of this (Fundo Nacional de Desenvolvimento da Educação, 2020). National dietary guidelines, which are important sources of information regarding what constitutes a healthy diet, have also been increasingly mentioning UPFs or the degree of food processing (Armet et al., 2022; Koios et al., 2022). In addition to these measures, minimising industry interference in health policy making is also seen as an important step (Popkin et al., 2021).

The literature on UPF-related policy interventions frequently draws parallels between measures designed to reduce UPF consumption and those historically employed to curb the use of harmful products such as alcohol and tobacco (Lustig, 2020; Moodie et al., 2013; Popkin et al., 2021; Scrinis et al., 2025). The success of taxation, advertising restrictions, and other regulatory strategies in reducing the consumption of these substances is often cited as evidence of the potential effectiveness of similar approaches for UPFs (Lustig, 2020; Popkin et al., 2021; Scrinis et al., 2025). However, unlike alcohol and tobacco, despite being associated with poor diet quality, UPFs still serve as a source of nutrition for

many consumers and may require substitution with alternative foods upon discontinuation. Therefore, regulatory strategies would need to be complemented by measures that promote the availability, affordability, and desirability of minimally processed foods (Scrinis et al., 2025).

With the exception of interventions focused on altering food environments without necessitating direct consumer action – such as product reformulation and school meal reforms – most policy measures rely heavily on consumers' ability and willingness to make dietary substitutions. While some scholars such as Forde and Decker (2022), Jackson (2018), Jackson and Viehoff (2016), Lockyer et al. (2023), Sadler et al. (2021), Scholliers (2015), and Trumbo et al. (2024) have raised concerns regarding the practical and social implications of dietary substitutions and cooking from scratch, the gendered impact of this transition has been understudied.

The NOVA framework explicitly situates UPFs within a broader political–economic context, recognising their displacement of long-standing food cultures by transnational corporate actors, while also affirming the central role of food processing in sustaining healthy diets, cuisines, and economies (Baker et al., 2025). In the recent Lancet series on UPFs, Scrinis et al. (2025) acknowledge that women continue to bear primary responsibility for food preparation in many cultural contexts and emphasise that reducing UPF consumption will require redistributing women's care work burdens. However, many UPF-reduction policies draw on NOVA and UPF research in a more truncated way, focusing narrowly on consumer behaviour change without engaging these structural, cultural, and commercial determinants (Northcott et al., 2025). In response to and critique of such approaches, this commentary explores evidence showing that domestic food preparation, procurement, and planning – referred to as foodwork hereon – are activities whose burden disproportionately falls on women and thus, reducing UPF consumption could inadvertently increase the time, energy, and resources women spend on food provisioning at home. Based on this hypothesis, we propose how policies targeting UPF consumption can explicitly account for the gendered dimensions of domestic foodwork and incorporate measures to distribute these responsibilities more equitably within society.

Women, domestic foodwork, and ultra-processed foods

Historically, women have carried a disproportionate load of unpaid work, that is, services in a household setting such as caregiving and housework (Seedat & Rondon, 2021). Within this context, foodwork arose as a sociological phenomenon that encompasses a wide range of activities that sustain everyday eating practices such as grocery shopping, cooking, serving, cleaning, and managing leftovers (Beagan et al., 2008; DeVault, 1991; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). Next to physical labour, foodwork, like all other household work, also involves significant cognitive and emotional labour (see Daminger, 2019) invested in tasks such as meal planning, weighing nutritional and food safety risks, interpreting conflicting dietary advice, and managing family members' preferences and health concerns. Although these tasks are often perceived as private, mundane acts, feminist scholars have shown that they are deeply social and political, reflecting and reinforcing existing gender, class, and racial hierarchies (Fielding-Singh & Oleschuk, 2023; McIntosh & Zey, 1989). The drudgery within these activities also determines the quality and timing of women's paid work, resulting in lower earnings, adding extra physical and mental stress and perpetuating the cycle of gender inequalities (Seedat & Rondon, 2021).

The concept of foodwork was introduced by feminist sociologist Marjorie DeVault in 1991 in her pioneering work on the subject (DeVault, 1991). Thereafter, it has been applied to a variety of contemporary issues such as class-based experiences of cooking and eating (Oleschuk, 2024), maternal feeding practices (Fielding-Singh & Cooper, 2024; Karademir Hazir, 2024; Parsons et al., 2024), digital labour and food blogging cultures (Dejmanee, 2025; Morlacchi, 2024; Rodney et al., 2017), the intensification of domestic food responsibilities during crises (Kesterling et al., 2025), and ecofeminist approaches to sustainable eating (Ballif, 2024; Fraser & Parizeau, 2018). There is a growing body of research that documents the emotional strain women face in balancing paid work and domestic responsibilities, but comparatively less attention has been paid to the labour involved in managing the daily demands of family foodwork within the industrialised food system (MacKendrick & Pristavec, 2019).

UPFs, in combination with technological advances and a sharp rise in women's participation in the workforce, have profoundly transformed domestic foodwork over recent decades (Baker et al., 2020; Engler-Stringer, 2010; Griffith et al., 2022; Lam & Adams, 2017; Mazzonetto et al., 2025). Many UPFs are, in fact, marketed and consumed precisely because they minimise the time, effort, and skill required to prepare meals (Adams et al., 2020). These products, now ubiquitous in most domestic settings across the globe, have been instrumental in reshaping household food practices by offering a practical and affordable solution to the time scarcity experienced by women, particularly those who work outside their homes (Jabs & Devine, 2006). Thus, the impact of consuming UPFs on women's foodwork has implications for social reproduction, that is, the set of processes through which societies sustain themselves over time and remain recognisably the same. Stevano's (2025) work is particularly relevant here, as it frames UPFs as entangled with the organisation of social reproduction and highlights how they shape food consumption as well as food-related labour. From this perspective, domestic foodwork emerges as a key site through which dietary change is managed, with responsibilities for sourcing, preparing, and responding to the consequences of UPF-centred diets falling disproportionately on women.

These issues are not only examined in academic scholarship. As the debate on UPFs has increasingly entered the public arena, they have also been taken up in non-academic works such as Milli Hill's (2025) *Ultra-Processed Women*. Drawing on historical advertising, cultural analysis, and women's accounts of their lived experiences, Hill shows how corporations have long mobilised gendered ideals of motherhood and femininity, promising liberation from kitchen labour while simultaneously reinforcing women's moral responsibility for the family's care and nutrition. She documents how convenience foods have been framed as tools of efficiency and empowerment, even as expectations that women manage family health through food remain firmly in place. Hill further highlights how contemporary UPF marketing targets women through 'health', 'diet', and 'skinny' claims, embedding ideals of bodily restraint and self-surveillance. Alongside this, she discusses growing public concern about the relationship between UPFs and women's health, including hormonal regulation, inflammation, menstruation, fertility, and autoimmune conditions, while emphasising the uncertainty and uneven quality of evidence in these areas. Hill's analysis illustrates how responsibility for navigating dietary risk is increasingly individualised, placing additional cognitive and emotional burdens on women within food environments saturated by UPFs.

Relatedly, Bela Gil's (2023) *Quem vai fazer essa comida? (Who Will Prepare This Meal?)* exposes the contemporary realities of UPF consumption and food labour in Brazil, highlighting how colonial legacies have disproportionately shaped the lives and labour of Black and racialised women. The book elaborates on the relationships between food, gender, race, and economic power, positioning domestic labour and food preparation as central pillars of modern economies. Gil's argument concerns the systematic invisibility and devaluation of carework, particularly food preparation, which feminist economic theory has long argued is excluded from conventional economic analyses despite its foundational role in sustaining the workforce. Ultimately, Gil proposes the recognition and remuneration of domestic labour as essential to food justice, income redistribution, and social equality.

Another important dimension to consider in this discussion is men's involvement in domestic foodwork. Despite men being increasingly involved in domestic labour, foodwork remains disproportionately performed by women. The unequal share of household activities undertaken by women, including foodwork, is closely linked to several dimensions of the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2025) and remains rooted in traditional gender norms (OECD, 2019). In the United States, for example, women are estimated to spend twice as much time engaged in foodwork compared to men (Taillie, 2018). In Brazil, a country at the forefront of policy debates on reducing UPF consumption, national data show that 95.6% of women, including those engaged in full-time paid employment, continue to perform daily meal preparation and cleaning, compared to only 59.8% of men (IBGE, 2018). In European countries, the scenario is not much different. According to Eurostat (2018), 79% of women were responsible for cooking and/or household activities daily, compared to only 34% of men. In Africa, Ethiopia registers the highest gender disparity in meal preparations, with more than double the work taken up by women. In Southeast Asian countries, Myanmar women, on a weekly average, cook 7.5 meals more than men, while in Thailand, the difference is of roughly 1.5 meals (Wolfson et al., 2021). These figures demonstrate that even today, the patriarchal norm of women being responsible for feeding the family continues to persist, even in regions widely viewed as progressive.

Empirical evidence further suggests that even in households where men participate in cooking, women still bear the cognitive and managerial burden of meal planning and dietary risk management (Daming, 2019). Scholars have described this phenomenon as ‘women carrying the pantry in the head’, referring to the emotional and mental labour of tracking groceries, planning meals, and ensuring dietary needs are met (Ekström, 1990; Neuman, 2021). While men’s participation in cooking has increased in some contexts, their involvement is often experienced as leisure or ‘foodplay’, rather than as necessary, routine labour (Szabo, 2013). For instance, in Sweden, which is widely regarded as a progressive society where men participate in domestic life to a greater extent than in many other countries, evidence points to men experiencing much less societal pressure when they engage in foodwork (Neuman, 2021).

Furthermore, motherhood adds a layer of complexity to these gendered expectations. Central to the moral landscape of foodwork is the ideology of ‘good’ mothering (Fielding-Singh & Cooper, 2024; Karademir Hazir, 2024; Parsons et al., 2024). In most cultural contexts, mothers are expected to embody maternal care through the provision of home-cooked, nutritious meals (Brenton, 2017; da Silva Oliveira et al., 2022; Fielding-Singh & Cooper, 2024). The role of the mother in providing nutrition begins during pregnancy and continues into the breastfeeding period. Although breastfeeding is widely recommended, formula feeding is a safe and necessary alternative when breastfeeding is not possible. However, its classification as a UPF may contribute to the stigmatisation of mothers who rely on it (McNee & Williams, 2023; Moss-Racusin et al., 2020). Analyses through a political economy lens show how infant formula functions as a commodified substitute for under-supported care work. Baker et al. (2023) critique the expansion of formula markets as being driven not by maternal preference, but as a result of the systematic failure to provide the time, income security, workplace protections, as well as the practical and emotional support required for breastfeeding. From this perspective, reliance on UPFs in infant feeding should not be understood as a failure of maternal responsibility, but as a consequence of social and institutional neglect, underscoring the need for systemic policy responses rather than behaviour change interventions. Furthermore, the narrative of children learning about food by ‘cooking by their mother’s side’ continues to reinforce the expectation that, beyond feeding practices, women are also expected to carry the responsibility for food-related learning (Oleschuk, 2019). This role is framed as essential to raising a generation of future consumers who are knowledgeable about health-promoting eating habits and are equipped with the skills needed to achieve them (Oleschuk, 2019).

Intersectional analyses reveal how class, race, and other social identities overlap to shape women’s experiences of foodwork and their use of UPFs. Women from low income and racialised backgrounds in high income countries often contend with food deserts, precarious employment, and financial constraints that limit their ability to access fresh or minimally processed foods (Brenton, 2017, 2017; Oleschuk, 2024; Parker, 2020), leading to the inclusion of industrially prepared foods including UPF – which are typically more affordable, long-lasting, and quicker to prepare – in their food provisioning strategies. Women with class privilege, on the other hand, are able to outsource at least a part of the domestic foodwork that is societally expected from them to less privileged people (often women and other marginalised people), thereby being able provide their families with a healthier diet but also reproducing hierarchies of gender, race, and class within and beyond the household (Fielding-Singh & Oleschuk, 2023).

In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), the role of industrially prepared food in affording women freedom from gendered expectations cannot be underestimated. In the African context, Amey and Glatzel (2025) acknowledge that excessive consumption of UPFs, in combination with urbanisation trends and the increase in sedentary lifestyles, can negatively impact public health. Minimal food processing to transform local staples, on the other hand, is underscored as crucial in alleviating ‘female time poverty’ by reducing cooking time while meeting the nutritional requirements of the family. Reardon et al. (2021) present evidence from across African food systems to show that while UPFs contribute to obesity and non-communicable diseases, (minimally) processed foods more broadly generate significant positive externalities for women, including employment and opportunities for participation in the workforce. As Reardon and colleagues argue, minimally processed foods can reduce the time women spend on labour-intensive food preparation, yet their ultra-processed forms may pose health risks, creating a policy challenge of supporting women’s time equity and livelihoods while limiting harmful dietary impacts.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, urbanisation, access to education and reproductive choices, and an increase in male migration have left many women solely responsible for household income as well as food provisioning (Biermayr-Jenzano, 2019). As a result, women have less time to spare for foodwork than they did before, and this in turn pushes them towards food options that are more convenient but often less nutritious (Biermayr-Jenzano, 2019). In Asia as well, a sharp rise in UPF purchase and intake has been noted. This nutrition transition is mainly seen in younger populations, especially in Korea and China, as a result of longer working hours and limited time for food preparation (Jung et al., 2024; Pan et al., 2023). In many countries of the region, convenience stores are a key piece of the current urban, peri-urban and rural food environments, offering single-portion ready-to-eat and instant meals, which are quick and practical ways to sort meals, reducing cooking time, especially for women (Nguyen et al., 2021; Vandevijvere et al., 2019).

Stevano (2025), however, cautions against viewing the convenience offered by UPFs as either purely emancipatory or purely harmful. While such foods may temporarily alleviate pressures on social reproduction by reducing women's time burdens, their expansion can contribute to longer-term depletion through deteriorating health and increased care demands. Importantly, she argues that these dynamics involve trade-offs in the organisation of everyday life: time freed from food preparation may enable women's participation in paid work, yet the resulting incomes are often spent within food environments dominated by poor-quality options. As such, the ambivalence of UPFs reflects structural conditions in food and labour systems, rather than individual women's choices alone.

Finally, while this paper foregrounds the burdens and inequities associated with food and care work, it is important to acknowledge that domestic foodwork is also experienced by women as a source of pleasure, a part of convivial living, and as a means of expressing care, transmitting cultural knowledge, and sustaining kinship ties (DeVault, 1991; Oleschuk, 2019; Julier, 2004). Lewis (2016) argues that focusing only on the oppressive dimensions of domestic foodwork obscures how practices of cooking and feeding can generate forms of agency and freedom that are not captured by labour-centred or rights-based feminist analyses. In this sense, foodwork may function as an antidote to the alienation and abstraction that is characteristic of commodified food systems, even as it remains structured by unequal gendered expectations.

Accounting for the gendered aspects of foodwork in policy interventions

A key reason why gendered foodwork remains marginal in policy design lies in how economic value is defined and measured. As Waring (2003) demonstrates, dominant accounting frameworks exclude unpaid domestic and care labour from measures of economic activity, rendering women's contributions invisible in policy-relevant data. When food preparation, feeding, and care are not recognised as productive labour, policy interventions implicitly treat them as costless and infinitely elastic resources. Applying Waring's argument in our case, we argue that UPF-reduction strategies that rely on increased home cooking or meal preparation effectively externalise labour costs onto women, without acknowledgement, compensation, or structural support.

In the context of interventions aimed at reducing UPF consumption to improve public health outcomes, there is an urgent need for empirical research that examines the intersections between UPF consumption and the gendered nature of foodwork in diverse socio-cultural and geographical contexts. While existing studies document the health impacts of UPF and their association with social determinants such as income, education, and occupation, much less is known about how shifts away from UPFs influence household labour dynamics, time allocation, and emotional burdens. Gathering systematic evidence on how different groups of women – across lines of class, race, and geography – experience changes in foodwork when responding to policy interventions is essential for designing effective and equitable measures. Such research could illuminate, for example, whether reductions in UPF consumption lead to increased unpaid domestic work for women, and under what conditions such outcomes might be mitigated.

A key avenue for policy intervention lies in improving food environments so that access to minimally processed, healthy foods does not depend solely on individual household capacity or effort (Northcott et al., 2025). Creating supportive food environments in schools, universities, workplaces, hospitals, and

health and wellness centres can help to reduce reliance on UPFs without shifting the burden onto women at home. Empirical data from interventions aimed at improving the nutritional quality of public food procurement indicate that such measures do increase fruit and vegetable intake, reduce sugar-sweetened beverages consumption, and improve overall diet quality (Burgaz et al., 2023).

Additionally, educational interventions can play a crucial role in reconfiguring the gendered expectations surrounding foodwork. Coupling school-based food literacy programmes with cooking classes in low-income neighbourhoods has proven to be more effective than food literacy programmes alone (Evans et al., 2012; Vaughan et al., 2024). This pattern was also observed in an intervention conducted in another low-income community where boys, particularly those with little prior cooking experience, showed the greatest improvements in nutrition behaviours and cooking self-efficacy (Cunningham-Sabo & Lohse, 2014). These findings highlight that by equipping all children with the skills needed to plan, prepare, and share responsibility for meals, food literacy and skill-based initiatives can contribute to a more equitable distribution of foodwork within households.

Public campaigns aimed at reducing UPF consumption should also foreground the importance of equitable distribution of foodwork. Advertisements and public campaigns hold a strong role in perpetuating stereotypes about men being the breadwinners while women being responsible for cooking and other foodwork. Therefore, messaging that emphasises collective family responsibility can help to challenge entrenched gender norms (Gentry & Harrison, 2010). Campaigns could, for instance, highlight stories and images of fathers and sons engaging in healthy meal preparation, thereby normalising and valorising men's participation in foodwork. Rather than solely focusing on the nutritional or health benefits of minimally processed foods, public narratives should also attend to the social and relational dimensions of food preparation, explicitly promoting shared domestic labour as a normative ideal. Campaigns such as Mozambique's 'Men in the Kitchen' initiative and the early 2000s Swedish photo exhibition 'Dear Child: On Men, Children and Gender Equality in Sweden' have portrayed men engaging in cooking and other food preparation activities, helping to foster more positive attitudes and greater competence among visitors regarding their role in the kitchen and other foodwork related tasks (Goedecke & Klinth, 2021; UN Women, 2013). Evidence from the field shows that men who have greater foodwork experience from a young age are more adept in the kitchen and involved in foodwork (Yoshii et al., 2025). Additionally, campaigns that involve children in the kitchen not only offer symbolic representations of ideals of gender equity but also help bridge the gap between theory and practice in everyday foodwork (Goedecke & Klinth, 2021).

Technological interventions offer an additional, albeit partial, means of redistributing foodwork within households. Digital tools, such as meal planning and grocery management applications, can facilitate the division of both visible tasks (like cooking and shopping) and cognitive tasks (such as planning meals and tracking household inventories). By making the often-invisible mental load of foodwork more explicit and shareable, such technologies can support a more balanced distribution of responsibilities. While not a substitute for broader cultural and policy shifts, these tools can complement other strategies aimed at reducing the unequal burden of foodwork on women.

Additionally, food processing must be viewed as part of the solution. NOVA does not argue that food processing itself is harmful; rather, it attempts to distinguish between forms of processing that support food safety, preservation, and cooking, and the industrial formulation of UPF, which may encourage overconsumption, displace whole foods, and have potential negative health effects (Baker et al., 2025). For decades, processed food products have been embraced as a means of alleviating the intense time pressures faced by women, particularly those engaged in paid labour outside the home. In these contexts, such products can provide crucial flexibility, enabling women to balance competing demands of income generation, childcare, and household management. Thus, policymakers should not conflate UPFs with more minimally processed foods and overlook the emancipatory potential that certain forms of food processing using locally grown produce can hold for women. Policies in these contexts might focus on promoting the development and dissemination of healthier convenience foods (particularly for essential staples such as bread and breakfast cereals) that retain the time-saving benefits of UPFs while improving nutritional quality and avoiding the negative health impacts associated with UPFs. Keeping abreast of research developments, to better understand the mechanisms underpinning the associations of UPFs with health, can guide product development.

Collective and community-based approaches also offer promising pathways for alleviating the individual burden of foodwork. Community kitchens, cooperative meal schemes, and shared cooking spaces can enable the pooling of resources and labour, reducing the pressure on individual women to provide daily meals alone. Such models not only support healthier eating practices but also foster social well-being and resilience, providing spaces for knowledge exchange and mutual support (Iacovou et al., 2013). In Latin America, community kitchens or soup kitchens tend to emerge and adapt in response to shifting socio-economic conditions. Such kitchens can transition from emergency meal provision to community training hubs, building leadership among marginalised women, strengthening emotional resilience, and sharing foodwork more equitably (Espacio Común, 2020; Sordini & Arriola Miranda, 2023). Moreover, community kitchens play a crucial cohesion role in integrating groups into communities, as is the case with Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Not only did this improve the food security of the Syrian refugees, but it also aided in their integration into local communities (Ibrahim et al., 2019).

Beyond the domestic and community spheres, it is essential to recognise the critical role that food corporations play in shaping dietary environments and consumption patterns. The expansion of UPFs has been driven in large part by corporate strategies that prioritise profitability over public health, including aggressive marketing, product formulation that exploits sensory preferences, cost optimisation, market dominance and accessibility (Baker et al., 2025; Clapp et al., 2025; Scrinis, 2020; Wood et al., 2021). While individual and household-level changes are important, they cannot bear the full weight of addressing the harms associated with UPFs. Thus, governments have a crucial responsibility to hold food corporations accountable for their role in promoting unhealthy products and contributing to diet-related health inequalities.

Policy measures should go beyond encouraging voluntary reformulation or self-regulation, which evidence has shown to be largely ineffective (Moodie et al., 2021; Seferidi et al., 2021). Instead, governments can mandate stricter standards for nutritional content, limit the use of harmful ingredients, and incentivise the production of healthier processed options that are both accessible and affordable. By imposing robust regulatory frameworks and monitoring compliance, states can shift the onus at least partially from consumers to producers, ensuring that the food system itself supports rather than undermines public health goals. Such approaches would not only alleviate the burden on households, particularly on women tasked with navigating and compensating for unhealthy food environments, but also create broader structural conditions in which healthier, more equitable diets become the default rather than the exception.

Ultimately, incorporating considerations of gender and foodwork into academic, public, and policy debates on UPFs entails moving beyond an individualistic paradigm of dietary change and towards a more holistic approach that accounts for the social organisation of care and reproduction. Rather than positioning healthier eating as an additional responsibility to be absorbed within existing domestic structures, policies should actively engage with and seek to transform these structures to promote equity and shared responsibility. By foregrounding the social dimensions of healthy food provisioning, it becomes possible to develop strategies that not only improve health outcomes but also advance broader goals of social justice and gender equity. To achieve truly transformative outcomes, policy frameworks must integrate a nuanced understanding of foodwork, prioritise structural support over individual behavioural change, and commit to fostering more equitable distributions of labour within households and across societies.

Note

1. Many critiques of the NOVA classification systems, whether raised by researchers with industry affiliation or otherwise, have been discussed in Monteiro et al. (2025).

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Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this commentary.

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