(REVIEW ARTICLE)

Cooking, Culture, and Care: A Critical Review of the Decline of Home Cooking and Its Implications for Health, Family and Society

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Abstract

This review critically examines the global decline of home cooking and its far-reaching consequences for nutrition, family cohesion, cultural identity, mental health, and social equity. Drawing upon quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method research, the paper situates cooking at the intersection of health, cultural transmission, emotional labour, and psychological well-being. Evidence shows that regular home cooking is associated with improved diet quality, reduced obesity risk, greater family bonding, and enhanced happiness, with many participants describing it as a source of mindfulness and stress relief. At the same time, feminist and sociological critiques caution against romanticising foodwork, highlighting how the burdens of cooking remain unevenly distributed by gender, class, and time poverty. Synthesising current scholarship, this review argues that cooking must be reframed as a socially embedded practice shaped by structural inequalities rather than as an individual moral responsibility. Policy directions include subsidising fresh produce, expanding culinary education, promoting gender equity in domestic labour, and integrating cooking into public health interventions. Ultimately, the decline of home cooking is not only a nutritional issue but also a cultural, psychological, and relational challenge. Reviving it requires systemic supports, theoretical sensitivity, and cultural inclusivity rather than nostalgic appeals.

Keywords: Home Cooking; Family Systems; Feminist Food Studies; Nutrition; Cultural Continuity; Domestic Labour

1. Introduction

The decline of home cooking in the past four decades represents one of the most profound transformations in food culture across the globe. Historically, cooking within the household served as a cornerstone of daily life—an act that nourished the body, cemented family bonds, and transmitted cultural memory. Scholars across anthropology, sociology, nutrition, and psychology have highlighted that meals prepared and shared within families functioned as more than a practical necessity: they embodied rituals of care, intergenerational teaching, and expressions of cultural belonging (Mills et al., 2015; Teoh, 2023).

Yet since the late twentieth century, rapid industrialisation of the food system, changing gender roles, and the rise of processed and convenience foods have reshaped domestic kitchens. Households increasingly rely on ready-to-eat meals, restaurant dining, and food delivery platforms. Data from high-income countries indicate that fewer than 60% of meals consumed at home are cooked from scratch (Lavelle et al., 2016). Middle-income countries such as India and Brazil display hybrid practices, blending traditional meals with convenience foods as urban lifestyles accelerate (Rathi et al., 2025).

The shift away from cooking has provoked divergent interpretations. Nutritionists often frame cooking as a preventive strategy against obesity and chronic disease, highlighting its role in promoting dietary quality and reducing

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consumption of ultra-processed foods (Chen et al., 2025; Monteiro et al., 2018). Family theorists and psychologists stress its significance for cohesion, identity, and intergenerational transmission of values (Teoh, 2023). Feminist scholars, however, caution against the romanticisation of domestic cooking, reminding us that foodwork has historically been gendered labour disproportionately borne by women (Bowen, Brenton, & Elliott, 2014; Fielding-Singh, 2023).

Thus, home cooking is neither a simple act of preparing food nor a universally positive practice. It is a complex and contested site where issues of health, identity, care, and inequality converge. This paper aims to provide a critical review of research on the decline of home cooking, integrating quantitative, qualitative, and policy-oriented studies. The objectives are threefold:

- To examine the health and nutritional evidence linking home cooking with dietary outcomes.
- To explore sociocultural and emotional dimensions of cooking, including its role in family systems and cultural transmission.
- To evaluate structural constraints and policy responses that shape who cooks, how often, and under what conditions.

By synthesising these strands, this review argues that cooking must be understood as a socially embedded practice shaped by structural inequalities rather than as an individual lifestyle choice. Reviving domestic cooking, therefore, requires structural supports—affordable food access, time equity, gender redistribution of labour, and cultural sensitivity—rather than nostalgic appeals to a "return" to traditional family kitchens.

2. Literature Review and Critical Analysis

2.1. Quantitative Evidence: Health and Nutritional Dimensions

One of the strongest lines of research on home cooking concerns its measurable association with dietary quality and physical health. Epidemiological studies consistently show that frequent home cooking correlates with greater consumption of fruits, vegetables, and whole foods, alongside lower intake of ultra-processed items.

Mills et al. (2017), in a large UK cohort study of more than 11,000 adults, reported that those who ate home-cooked meals more than five times per week consumed on average 62 g more fruit and 98 g more vegetables daily than those cooking fewer than three times a week. These participants were also 28% less likely to have an overweight body mass index and 24% less likely to present excess body fat. Importantly, these associations held even after adjusting for socioeconomic status, education, and lifestyle factors, suggesting that cooking exerts an independent protective effect on diet quality.

Chen et al. (2025), examining family cooking in Taipei, expanded this nutritional argument by showing that shared cooking routines enhanced psychological flourishing, which itself is a mediator of healthier eating patterns. In other words, the act of cooking together generates not only immediate nutritional benefits but also longer-term behavioural resilience that supports better diets.

Nevertheless, quantitative evidence also reveals limits. Mills et al. (2017) found no significant associations between frequency of home cooking and biomarkers such as blood pressure, cholesterol, or HbA1c once adjustments were applied. Similarly, Polak et al. (2023) demonstrated that the expected health gains from cooking interventions depend strongly on participants' psychological readiness for change. These findings highlight that cooking alone is not a panacea for diet-related non-communicable diseases; rather, it is one element in a wider ecology of health behaviours.

Overall, quantitative evidence robustly links cooking with improved dietary quality and modest reductions in adiposity, but causal pathways to broader metabolic health remain less clear.

2.2. Qualitative Insights: Sociocultural and Emotional Dimensions

While numbers establish correlation, qualitative research captures the meanings of cooking as lived experience. Here, scholars argue that cooking is not reducible to nutrient optimisation but is embedded in emotion, memory, and identity.

Mills, Brown, Wrieden, and White (2020), analysing interviews and focus groups in the UK and US, found that participants rarely defined cooking in nutritional terms. Instead, they spoke of cooking as "care," "love," and "personal effort," with health outcomes treated as secondary or incidental. For many, a "home-cooked meal" was not defined by caloric composition but by whether it was prepared from scratch with attention and affection.

Teoh (2023) deepens this perspective by showing how family cooking rituals operate as a form of cultural communication. In his ethnography of intergenerational households, recipes were treated as "stories," with the kitchen serving as a site where values, traditions, and histories were reproduced. This aligns with Bowen's family systems theory, which positions shared rituals as crucial to cohesion and resilience.

Mazzonetto et al. (2020), through a meta-analysis of qualitative studies, identified three recurring themes: cooking as connection (strengthening bonds), as cultural expression (preserving identity), and as autonomy (exerting control over one's food environment). These dimensions illustrate how cooking functions simultaneously as material practice and symbolic act.

However, qualitative evidence also underscores ambivalence. Neuman et al. (2021) documented childhood food memories among low-income families, noting that while cooking sometimes evoked warmth and togetherness, it was also associated with stress, scarcity, and stigma. The kitchen could be both a site of intimacy and a reminder of inequality.

Such studies remind us that cooking is not universally empowering; its meanings shift according to context, resources, and histories.

2.3. Cooking as a Pathway to Happiness and Mental Well-Being

The relationship between cooking, happiness, and mental health is a relatively underexplored yet profoundly significant dimension of food studies. While nutritionists emphasise the physiological benefits of home-cooked meals and sociologists foreground their cultural resonance, psychologists and mental health scholars are increasingly attentive to how cooking can function as an emotional resource. The act of preparing food is not only an exercise in sustenance or tradition but also a form of affective labour that can generate joy, restore calm, and strengthen resilience against stress. In many contexts, especially for women, cooking is described as a "stress buster" that helps to remove negativity and create a sense of purpose and fulfilment in daily life.

Research on everyday creativity underscores this therapeutic potential. Conner et al. (2016), for instance, demonstrate that small-scale creative acts—including cooking—are positively associated with daily flourishing, elevated mood, and psychological resilience. The sensory immersion of selecting ingredients, chopping vegetables, stirring sauces, or garnishing a dish can be likened to practices of mindfulness, in which individuals engage deeply with the present moment. This embodied focus helps to divert attention from sources of anxiety, thereby producing a calming effect that psychologists often identify as flow or absorption. Cooking thus operates as both a utilitarian and meditative act, integrating body and mind in ways that promote emotional balance.

For many women, the kitchen is described not simply as a site of labour but as a space of emotional release. Women frequently report that cooking contributes to their happiness, often describing it as a "stress buster" that helps them to dispel negativity accumulated from daily routines. Preparing a meal for loved ones brings a sense of fulfilment and nurturance, reinforcing social bonds and affirming self-worth. Such dynamics resonate with theories of social bonding and reciprocity in positive psychology, where acts of giving and nurturing are closely tied to enhanced well-being. Chen et al. (2025) illustrate this connection in their study of family cooking routines in Taipei, finding that shared food preparation generated not only healthier dietary patterns but also greater psychological flourishing. These findings highlight that the benefits of cooking extend beyond nutrient intake to include the cultivation of emotional resilience and interpersonal closeness.

Importantly, the capacity of cooking to reduce stress is not merely anecdotal but supported by emerging therapeutic models. In occupational therapy, for example, cooking activities are increasingly incorporated as interventions for individuals dealing with depression, anxiety, or trauma. Known as "culinary therapy," these programmes utilise food preparation to build routine, provide sensory stimulation, and foster a sense of accomplishment. Preparing a meal from start to finish often gives participants tangible evidence of their agency, counteracting feelings of helplessness that accompany many mental health challenges. Similarly, culinary medicine initiatives, which blend nutrition education with hands-on cooking, suggest that the kitchen can be reframed as a site of both preventive health and mental restoration.

Nevertheless, this celebratory framing requires nuance. As feminist scholars remind us, cooking has historically been an unevenly distributed responsibility, disproportionately falling upon women. While some women find happiness in cooking, others experience it as an obligation that compounds existing stress, particularly in dual-earner or low-income households. Bowen, Brenton, and Elliott (2014) argue that exhortations to "cook more" can intensify pressure rather

than alleviate it, transforming what might otherwise be a pleasurable practice into a source of guilt and fatigue. Thus, cooking's role in promoting happiness cannot be detached from the structural contexts—time availability, social expectations, economic resources—that condition whether it is experienced as leisure or burden.

A balanced view, then, recognises the ambivalence of cooking for mental health. On one hand, it functions as an expressive outlet that fosters mindfulness, creativity, and positive mood; on the other, it risks becoming an enforced duty that reproduces inequality. Women's voices are especially telling here: many testify that cooking helps them "feel happy" and "remove negativity," yet others acknowledge moments when the same act becomes draining. Both accounts are valid and coexist in tension, reminding scholars and policymakers to avoid simplistic romanticisation.

In conclusion, cooking represents a vital site where happiness, stress, and mental health intersect. By acknowledging its dual potential—as a source of joy and as a locus of labour—scholarship can move toward a more comprehensive understanding of its psychological implications. For future research, it is necessary to investigate not only how cooking contributes to individual happiness but also under what conditions it ceases to be restorative. Policies and interventions that seek to revive home cooking must therefore integrate mental health perspectives, ensuring that the kitchen is envisioned not as a space of compulsion but as one of choice, creativity, and wellbeing.

2.4. Feminist and Sociological Critiques: Cooking as Labour

Perhaps the sharpest critiques come from feminist food studies. Bowen, Brenton, and Elliott (2014), in their influential book *Pressure Cooker*, argue that romanticising home cooking obscures the burdens it imposes, especially on women. Their ethnographic research with American families revealed that the expectation to "cook more" often intensified stress rather than alleviating it, as mothers struggled to balance work, childcare, and domestic labour.

Fielding-Singh (2023) extends this critique, situating feeding within broader transformations of gender roles, class stratification, and cultural expectations. She identifies distinct typologies—"low-priority cooks," "everyday cooks," and "hobby chefs"—that map onto inequalities of time, resources, and social capital. For low-income mothers, cooking was framed as a moral obligation despite resource constraints, highlighting the gendered and classed dimensions of foodwork.

Feminist scholars thus caution against treating cooking as a moral imperative or universal good. They remind us that domestic labour has historically been invisible, feminised, and undervalued. Calls to revive cooking, without structural support or gender redistribution, risk reinscribing these inequities.

2.5. Mixed-Method and Intervention Studies

Mixed-method studies bridge the gap between statistical evidence and lived experience. Polak et al. (2023) examined participants preparing for a cooking intervention trial and found that perceptions varied according to their "stage of change." Those in the action stage framed cooking as self-efficacy and autonomy, while those in contemplation anticipated stress and difficulty.

Reicks et al. (2014), in a systematic review of intervention programmes, concluded that hands-on cooking education increased self-efficacy and healthy food choices in both adults and children. However, the long-term sustainability of these effects remains uncertain.

Such studies underline that promoting cooking is not simply about teaching skills; it also involves recognising psychological readiness, social support, and environmental constraints.

2.6. Structural and Policy Contexts

Finally, research situates cooking within wider structural trends. Monteiro et al. (2018) link declining cooking to the rise of ultra-processed foods, arguing that industrial food systems actively displace culinary traditions. Rathi, Riddell, and Worsley (2025), studying urban Indian households, show how caregivers balance tradition with modernity, negotiating pressures of time and urban lifestyles.

Lavelle et al. (2016) highlight barriers such as fatigue, cost, and time poverty, particularly among younger generations. These structural factors remind us that cooking is not merely an individual choice but one shaped by labour markets, gender norms, and food environments.

2.7. Analytical Synthesis of the Literature

From this review, several insights emerge:

- Nutritional Evidence: Frequent cooking correlates with improved diet quality and modest reductions in obesity risk.
- Cultural Significance: Cooking is experienced as care, memory, and identity rather than simply health intervention.
- Inequalities: Feminist critiques highlight how burdens of cooking fall unequally, often intensifying gender and class divides.
- Interventions: Education and support programmes help, but effectiveness depends on readiness and sustainability.
- Structural Constraints: Broader economic and social systems—work hours, processed food markets, gender norms—shape cooking practices more than individual willpower.

Together, these strands demonstrate that cooking is a deeply embedded social practice, not a neutral behaviour. Its decline reflects not just lifestyle choices but transformations in labour, economy, and culture.

3. Policy Implications and Future Directions

3.1. Reframing Home Cooking Beyond Individual Responsibility

One of the clearest messages from the literature is that home cooking should not be cast as an individual moral obligation. Although studies consistently show that cooking is associated with healthier diets (Mills et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2025), researchers also caution against oversimplifying the issue into a "just cook more" directive (Bowen et al., 2014; Fielding-Singh, 2023). Such framings risk stigmatising families who cannot feasibly cook daily due to resource constraints, long working hours, or caregiving responsibilities.

Instead, policymakers should acknowledge cooking as a structurally mediated practice. Gender norms, income inequality, and labour market pressures all shape whether households can realistically prepare meals. By shifting discourse away from individual blame and toward systemic conditions, governments and institutions can create environments where cooking becomes more accessible and less burdensome.

3.2. Economic Supports and Food Access

3.2.1. Subsidising Fresh Produce

Affordability is one of the most consistent barriers to home cooking, particularly for low-income households. Studies demonstrate that the cost of fresh fruits, vegetables, and unprocessed staples strongly determines diet quality (Monteiro et al., 2018). Policies such as direct subsidies, vouchers for fresh produce, or tax reductions on whole foods could tip the balance away from ultra-processed options, which are often cheaper and more convenient.

3.2.2. Regulating Ultra-Processed Food Marketing

Another structural factor influencing cooking decline is the pervasive marketing of ready-to-eat foods. Monteiro et al. (2018) argue that industrial food systems actively displace traditional cooking through aggressive promotion of ultra-processed items. Restricting advertisements—especially those targeting children—could reduce normalisation of convenience foods and restore the visibility of fresh, whole ingredients.

3.2.3. Local Food Systems and Community Markets

Community-supported agriculture (CSA), farmers' markets, and urban gardening initiatives can make raw ingredients more available in underserved areas. Evidence suggests that proximity to fresh produce outlets correlates with higher cooking frequency (Lavelle et al., 2016). By investing in local supply chains, municipalities can strengthen food sovereignty and reduce dependence on industrial convenience options.

3.3. Time, Labour, and Gender Equity

3.3.1. Redistributing Domestic Labour

Feminist critiques emphasise that cooking responsibilities are unevenly distributed, falling disproportionately on women (Bowen et al., 2014). Policy must therefore move beyond promoting cooking to redistributing who cooks. Educational campaigns can challenge stereotypes by encouraging men and children to share culinary labour.

3.3.2. Workplace Policies for Work–Life Balance

Cooking requires time as much as ingredients. Long working hours and precarious jobs erode the possibility of regular meal preparation. Flexible scheduling, family-friendly working hours, and parental leave policies indirectly create conditions for more equitable food practices.

3.3.3. Support for Caregivers

Special attention should be given to single parents and caregivers, who often experience the sharpest tension between food labour and other responsibilities. Targeted supports—such as subsidised meal kits with raw ingredients, community kitchens, or shared cooking cooperatives—could alleviate this double burden.

3.4. Culinary Education and Intergenerational Skill Transmission

3.4.1. School-Based Cooking Curricula

Research shows that cooking skills are often lost between generations as convenience foods become normalised (Teoh, 2023). Introducing cooking education into schools could re-establish basic competencies. Beyond nutrition, such programmes foster confidence, creativity, and resilience among children (Reicks et al., 2014).

3.4.2. Community Kitchens and Skill-Sharing

Publicly funded community kitchens can provide both access to facilities and opportunities for collective cooking. Such spaces foster not only skill development but also social cohesion, particularly for migrant or low-income families.

3.4.3. Culinary Medicine

Healthcare systems increasingly recognise cooking as part of preventive care. Polak et al. (2023) highlight "culinary medicine" initiatives, where physicians integrate cooking guidance into patient consultations. Embedding practical cooking into health services can transform dietary counselling into actionable skills.

3.5. Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity

Cooking is not a culturally uniform practice. Rathi et al. (2025) show that urban Indian caregivers navigate between traditional cooking and modern constraints, producing hybrid practices. Immigrant communities often rely on cooking to preserve cultural identity (Mills et al., 2020). Policies must respect this diversity rather than imposing a homogenised model of "healthy cooking."

Community-led approaches, where cultural groups design their own food programmes, can strengthen both health outcomes and cultural resilience. For Indigenous populations, for instance, cooking is tied to ecological stewardship and spiritual practices. Programmes that integrate such perspectives avoid erasing cultural knowledge under the guise of public health.

3.6. Leveraging Technology and Media

Digital technologies, often blamed for the decline of cooking, can also serve as allies. Meal-kit services, recipe platforms, and cooking apps can lower barriers to entry by reducing planning and preparation time. If designed with cultural diversity and affordability in mind, such innovations could facilitate—not hinder—cooking practices.

Behavioural economics offers further opportunities: supermarkets can place fresh produce in visible, accessible locations; apps can nudge users toward home cooking with reminders or rewards. Even modest adjustments, such as providing pre-chopped vegetables at affordable prices, have been shown to increase cooking frequency (Reicks et al., 2014).

3.7. Health Systems and Preventive Interventions

Given the strong link between diet and chronic disease, health systems have a vested interest in promoting cooking. Culinary education for medical students equips them to provide practical dietary advice (Polak et al., 2023). Insurance incentives—such as reduced premiums for participation in verified cooking programmes—could align economic motivations with preventive health.

Such initiatives remain controversial, but they represent an important recognition: cooking is not only a cultural practice but also a public health intervention.

3.8. Addressing Structural Inequalities

Cooking assumes access to safe kitchens, functioning appliances, and adequate utilities—conditions not universally available. Neuman et al. (2021) emphasise that interventions which ignore these material constraints risk reinforcing stigma. Urban planning should therefore ensure that housing includes well-equipped kitchens, while poverty alleviation programmes must consider subsidies for utilities and cooking infrastructure.

Food banks and social services could integrate recipe guidance and cooking workshops alongside food distribution, ensuring that raw ingredients are not only provided but also usable. Such measures empower households rather than burdening them with unfamiliar foods.

3.9. Directions for Future Research

Several gaps remain in the scholarship:

- Longitudinal Evidence – Most studies are cross-sectional. Future research should establish causal pathways between cooking frequency and long-term health outcomes.
- Cross-Cultural Comparisons – Cooking decline unfolds differently across societies. Comparative studies could reveal alternative models of adaptation.
- Gendered Labour – More research is needed on how cooking responsibilities shift in dual-earner households, single-parent families, and queer kinship structures.
- Policy Evaluations – Few studies systematically assess the impact of subsidies, cooking curricula, or community kitchens. Rigorous evaluations would clarify which interventions are most effective.
- Technology and Behavioural Nudges – Little is known about how digital tools influence cooking habits. Mixed-method studies could illuminate their potential as supportive aids.

3.10. Summary of Policy Implications

The reviewed evidence points toward a multi-layered paradigm:

- Health Promotion: Cooking improves diet quality but must be supported by systemic change.
- Equity and Inclusion: Structural supports—time, income, cultural respect—are essential.
- Redistribution: Cooking should be reframed as shared labour, not feminised duty.
- Education: Skills must be taught across schools, communities, and health systems.
- Cultural Recognition: Culinary diversity and intergenerational continuity must be celebrated.
- Structural Supports: Safe kitchens, affordable produce, and labour protections are prerequisites.

4. Discussion

4.1. Revisiting the Multifaceted Role of Home Cooking

The evidence reviewed across quantitative, qualitative, and feminist research underscores that home cooking cannot be reduced to a single dimension of health behaviour. Rather, it is a multifaceted practice situated at the nexus of nutrition, cultural identity, family cohesion, and labour dynamics.

From a nutritional perspective, studies consistently associate frequent cooking with improved diet quality, greater fruit and vegetable consumption, and lower levels of obesity risk (Mills et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2025). However, causal relationships with broader cardiometabolic outcomes remain underexplored, suggesting that cooking contributes modestly to physical health but requires integration with wider lifestyle and environmental supports.

From a cultural and relational standpoint, cooking emerges as a practice rich with symbolic and emotional significance. As Teoh (2023) and Mazzonetto et al. (2020) demonstrate, cooking functions as a form of care, memory, and cultural transmission. Meals prepared at home embody love, identity, and belonging, resonating far beyond their nutritional value. This dimension aligns closely with family systems theory, which stresses that rituals strengthen cohesion, transmit values, and create resilience across generations.

Yet cooking is also a site of inequality. Feminist scholarship reminds us that romanticising domestic foodwork risks obscuring its burdens, particularly for women who already balance employment, childcare, and caregiving (Bowen et al., 2014; Fielding-Singh, 2023). For low-income households, cooking can be simultaneously a source of comfort and a reminder of scarcity (Neuman et al., 2021). These tensions reveal that cooking is not an unalloyed good; it can empower or constrain depending on structural contexts.

Thus, home cooking should be reframed not as a moral imperative but as a socially embedded practice: an activity shaped by cultural narratives, gender norms, labour markets, and food systems.

4.2. The Double Burden: Care and Constraint

A recurring theme across the literature is the double burden of cooking: it embodies care and togetherness, yet it can also reproduce stress and inequality. Families often describe home meals as moments of intimacy and continuity, yet the responsibility for producing those meals disproportionately falls on women. As PBS-inspired studies and Bowen et al. (2014) argue, exhortations to "cook more" may intensify rather than relieve domestic pressure.

This ambivalence calls for nuanced approaches. Policies must avoid romanticisation while still recognising the relational warmth and health benefits of cooking. Interventions should not simply demand more cooking but instead redistribute labour, reduce barriers, and reframe cooking as shared, supported, and valued work.

4.3. Intergenerational Transmission and Cultural Continuity

Cooking plays a pivotal role in sustaining cultural heritage. Recipes, techniques, and food rituals act as vehicles for intergenerational transmission, embedding cultural values in everyday practice (Teoh, 2023). In urban Indian households, Rathi et al. (2025) show how caregivers adapt traditional practices to modern constraints, producing hybrid cuisines that both preserve and transform cultural identity.

The erosion of cooking therefore threatens more than health—it risks the loss of cultural memory. If kitchens become mere sites of reheating industrially produced foods, opportunities for storytelling, tradition, and identity-making diminish. Reviving cooking must thus be understood as a project of cultural preservation as much as nutritional intervention.

This perspective aligns with anthropological theories of foodways, which treat food practices as carriers of symbolic meaning and social order. Supporting cooking is, in effect, supporting the endurance of cultural heritage.

4.4. Social Inequalities and Access to Cooking Resources

Cooking presupposes certain infrastructural conditions: access to fresh ingredients, functional kitchens, time, and energy. These cannot be taken for granted. For families living in poverty, the absence of reliable utilities, affordable groceries, or adequate housing makes cooking a challenge (Neuman et al., 2021).

Without attention to these inequalities, campaigns promoting cooking risk stigmatizing the very groups most constrained from participating. A low-income single mother working multiple jobs may experience "cook more" messaging not as empowerment but as guilt-inducing.

To address these inequities, policies must embed cooking within broader frameworks of social justice: housing policies that ensure functional kitchens, poverty alleviation measures that subsidise utilities and appliances, and urban planning that provides affordable grocery access. Cooking must be framed not as an isolated behaviour but as an activity contingent on structural supports.

4.5. Global Perspectives: Convergence and Divergence

Although much scholarship comes from Western contexts, global studies reveal both convergence and divergence in cooking decline. In high-income countries, time scarcity, dual-earner households, and digital convenience accelerate reliance on industrial foods (Lavelle et al., 2016). By contrast, middle-income contexts such as India exhibit hybrid

practices, where cultural traditions remain strong but urbanisation pressures reshape cooking habits (Rathi et al., 2025).

Indigenous communities further complicate this narrative, where cooking is tied to ecological stewardship and spiritual practices. Here, food preparation cannot be disentangled from land, environment, and cosmology. Policies promoting "healthy cooking" in such contexts must recognise these deeper entanglements to avoid cultural erasure.

The diversity of practices highlights the risk of universalising narratives. Calls for reviving the "family meal" may resonate in some societies but alienate others. A pluralistic approach, attentive to local contexts, offers a more equitable path forward.

4.6. Technology: Threat or Ally?

Digital technologies are often portrayed as culprits in cooking decline, enabling food delivery platforms and pre-prepared meal markets. Yet they also hold potential as allies. Apps, recipe platforms, and meal-kit services can lower barriers by reducing planning effort and providing step-by-step support.

If oriented toward inclusivity and affordability, digital tools could democratise cooking knowledge, connecting users with culturally diverse recipes and affordable ingredient kits. Behavioural nudges, such as supermarket layout changes or app-based rewards for cooking, may further encourage home meal preparation (Reicks et al., 2014).

Thus, technology represents not an inherent threat but a contested space: its impact depends on design, accessibility, and alignment with cultural needs.

4.7. Toward a Balanced Paradigm

- Taken together, the evidence calls for a balanced paradigm that recognises both the benefits and burdens of cooking.
- As Health Practice: Cooking supports better diets but is insufficient alone for preventing chronic disease.
- As Cultural Practice: Cooking transmits traditions, identity, and relational warmth.
- As Labour: Cooking is gendered and classed, often intensifying inequality.
- As Socially Embedded: Cooking depends on systemic conditions—time, money, kitchens, markets.
- A balanced paradigm therefore requires multi-level interventions:
- Health Promotion – Frame cooking as part of holistic wellbeing, not just calorie control.
- Policy Reform – Subsidise fresh produce, regulate ultra-processed food markets, and support local supply chains.
- Gender Redistribution – Normalise shared responsibility for cooking across households.
- Education – Teach cooking skills in schools, healthcare, and community settings.
- Cultural Sensitivity – Celebrate diversity of foodways and respect cultural traditions.
- Structural Support – Ensure kitchens, time, and affordable resources are available for all.
- Technological Integration – Harness digital tools to reduce barriers without displacing cultural knowledge.
- This multi-layered approach shifts cooking from an individualised moral demand to a collective social good, embedded in health, culture, and equity.

5. Reflective Conclusion: Rekindling the Hearth

When cooking stops at home, something larger than nutrition is lost. The decline of domestic meal preparation erodes not only dietary quality but also opportunities for relational warmth, intergenerational teaching, and cultural continuity. Cooking has long been a site where care, identity, and community converge.

Yet romanticising the kitchen risks overlooking its inequalities. Cooking can be empowering, but it can also be exhausting, gendered, and exclusionary. The key is to imagine kitchens not as nostalgic relics but as inclusive, equitable, and supported spaces—sites of nourishment, creativity, and resilience that belong to everyone.

This review has shown that the decline of cooking is neither inevitable nor uniform. It reflects structural transformations—industrial food systems, time poverty, gender inequities—that can be addressed through thoughtful policy and cultural change. Reviving cooking is therefore less about returning to a mythical past and more about reimagining the future of foodwork: a future where kitchens are supported by structural equity, enriched by cultural diversity, and sustained as spaces of health and care.

As such, home cooking should be valued not merely for its calories or nutrients but for its profound role in sustaining human connection. To rekindle the hearth is to restore not just meals but the fabric of communal life.

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