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# Behind kitchens' doors: a case study on gendered dynamics in Italian canteens

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how gender hierarchies are reproduced and negotiated within Italian institutional catering kitchens. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in a large catering cooperative in Northern Italy, the study combines three months of participant observation across multiple cooking centres with seventeen semi-structured interviews with kitchen workers and supervisors. The analysis highlights a persistent paradox: although women constitute the majority of the workforce, they remain under-represented in managerial and technical full-time positions. The findings show how everyday organisational practices—including task allocation, scheduling, and performance evaluation—intersect with broader social expectations surrounding domestic care and the moral value of feeding others. These dynamics channel many women into less prestigious and lower-paid roles, while men more frequently occupy supervisory positions linked to production oversight, technical authority, and institutional recognition. By examining spatial organisation, contractual arrangements, and expectations of emotional labour, the article demonstrates how gendered career trajectories are produced within the ostensibly neutral environment of institutional food service.

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Gender inequalities; kitchen; canteen; ethnography; institutional catering

## 1. Introduction

The professional culinary sector has historically been dominated by men, even though cooking is often considered a female role within the domestic sphere (Forino, 2019). While women are typically associated with domestic cooking, the professional kitchen remains a male-dominated space: this environment is often characterized as technical, authoritarian, competitive, and physically demanding – qualities culturally associated with masculinity (Harris & Giuffrè, 2015). This gender disparity is particularly evident in leadership positions such as chefs, executive chefs, and sous chefs, as well as in strategic business decision-making. Conversely, women are the large majority of kitchen staff and often occupy less recognized and lower-paid roles, such as assistant chefs, dishwashers, or, in

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some cases, pastry chefs. While men dominate positions that carry greater prestige and public recognition, women tend to occupy less visible roles, experiencing situations of 'invisible work' and different forms of exploitation and symbolic violence.

Gender, masculinity, and power dynamics in professional kitchens have been the focus of numerous studies (Cano, 2019; Droz, 2015; Harris & Giuffre, 2015). However, little research has addressed these issues in the field of institutional catering, particularly in Italy, where this subject remains largely underexplored.

Institutional catering refers to a sector that provides meals to specific groups mainly in non-commercial settings through large-scale, planned services (Sebola et al., 2019). This form of catering serves a social function, addressing the food needs of distinct populations such as students, hospital patients, and the elderly (André et al., 2024), as well as workers during their lunch break. The goal is to deliver balanced, controlled meals that ensure food safety in environments such as schools, hospitals, retirement homes, day-care centres, and factory cafeterias. Beyond its nutritional role, institutional catering also fulfils a social function, acting as a space for communal gathering (Caputo et al., 2017; Mistretta et al., 2019).

This research aims to explore gender inequalities within the institutional catering sector, focusing specifically on the role of male and female cooks employed in canteens. Through the analysis of an ethnographic case study conducted within the canteens of a company providing institutional catering services, this article examines gender relations and power dynamics in professional kitchen environments. The methodology, primarily qualitative, enabled an immersive understanding of workers' experiences (Semi, 2010). Considering fieldnotes collected through participant observation and transcriptions of 17 semi-structured interviews, the study investigates how gender dynamics unfold in spaces where institutional catering is carried out with a primarily social purpose, blending the traditionally male-dominated aspects of culinary work with the female-dominated realm of caregiving (Saraceno, 2009; Sarti, 2017, 2024).

## 2. Gendering professional kitchen work: a literature review

The division of labour within households has historically been gendered, with the kitchen often framed as the feminine space par excellence and cooking as a quintessential feminine activity (Sarti, 2024). The problematic nature of these associations has long been debated in gender and feminist studies.

Early feminist thinkers have identified the kitchen as a symbol of women's subordinated position and cooking as a key example of the many undervalued, tedious and thankless tasks that women are expected to perform for free (Friedan, 1963; Weisstein, 1968). Amongst others, Simone De Beauvoir (1979) provided a fundamental critique of the kitchen as a 'prison', identifying it as a symbolic and literal site of women's subjugation. De Beauvoir articulated the inherent limitations to women's agency and self-determination imposed by this domestic space that, symbolically and concretely, summarizes the association between femininity and self-denial, powerlessness, and immanence: 'woman is shut up in a kitchen or a boudoir, and astonishment is expressed that her horizon is limited' (p. 465). Within the space of the kitchen, the activity of cooking has similarly been considered in feminist literature as the exemplary expression of the exploitation of women's work on behalf of the masculine order (Walby, 1990). On the

one hand, assigning women to undervalued caregiving roles, such as cooking, has been identified as a key process of enforcement of a symbolic hierarchy between genders where femininity is equated with inferiority (Bourdieu, 1998; Firestone, 2015; Walby, 1990). On the other hand, men's participation in the labour market and the public sphere of society, along with the consequent accumulation of power and economic capital, has depended on the exploitation of women's unpaid care work (Federici, 2012).

The rigid and enduring association of women with the space of the kitchen and the activity of cooking that distinguishes the private sphere is not reflected when we shift our focus to professional kitchens and cooking as a career. The process of professionalization in kitchens has been the subject of extensive study. As early as 2008, Gunders examined this process, introducing the distinction between 'cooks' and 'chefs'. The formers are associated with an operational role, while the latter to a creative, conceptual role – the arm and the mind. Furthermore, studying recent processes of professionalization of Taiwanese kitchens, Ko and Lu (2021) have highlighted that cooking has gradually evolved into a profession that encompasses not only food preparation but also ideas and values, such as the issue of food waste. In 2020, the same authors emphasized the increasing demand for professional skills in the sector (Ko & Lu, 2020). As early as 2005, Bryant and McKay considered the nature of cooking and recognized kitchens as professional spaces with clear hierarchies, defined objectives and performance measurement. The more the sector professionalizes, the more it tends to reproduce the disparities found in other work sectors, in particular gender imbalances (Paraciani, 2023).

The professional kitchen, compared to other sectors of employment, exemplifies a striking paradox: while domestic cooking has traditionally been feminized, professional culinary spaces are overwhelmingly masculinized, dominated by male chefs who often enjoy higher pay, status, and visibility.

Harris and Giuffre (2015) highlight how professional kitchens are organized around a culture where traditional masculine attributes such as physical endurance, assertiveness, and competitiveness are idealized. This culture reinforces a belief that men are better suited to work and leadership roles in the high-pressure environment of professional kitchens, where cooking is reframed as an activity carried out in non-family-friendly times (mostly evenings and nights), as well as in spaces filled with potential hazards (fires, knives) deemed too dangerous for women (Albors-Garrigos et al., 2021).

DeVault (1991) observes that while men's participation in cooking at home is often celebrated as 'art' or 'craft', women's participation in professional kitchens remains invisible or devalued. In professional settings, women are often confined to roles responsible for performing basic food preparation tasks such as measuring or preparing ingredients (prep cook) or for cooking meal components that are considered complementary to the main course, such as sides and desserts (Cairns & Johnston, 2015). In this perspective, women are commonly assigned tasks that are considered less prestigious and less essential within the culture of the professional kitchens.

Studying masculinity in professional kitchens, Bennett (2006) suggests that practices such as verbal banter, public displays of dominance, and aggressive management styles reinforce a hyper-masculine culture, making it challenging for women to navigate these spaces. For example, women chefs frequently report experiencing harassment, tokenism, or being held to stricter standards of competence. Johnston et al. (2014) add that

professional kitchens operate within broader systems of privilege and inequality. The 'bravado'<sup>1</sup> culture of kitchens that marginalizes women is often combined with racial stereotypes that limit opportunities of participation even more blatantly for women of colour and migrant women, who face intersectional barriers related to both race and gender. This also leads to high levels of competitiveness and tensions also amongst women chefs.

Media representations of masculinity and femininity in cooking shows further exacerbate these disparities, reproducing cultural stereotypes influencing also hiring and promotional practices in the industry. As Contois (2020) argues, male chefs in popular media are portrayed as innovators and artists, with their professionalism, creativity and leadership celebrated, while women chefs are often depicted in ways that emphasize domesticity and caregiving. Amongst the chefs featured on television, men are predominantly the one who become celebrities (Fidolini, 2020). Their gender performances often rely on an exaggerated masculine model that emphasizes competition, aggressiveness, stoicism, Stakhanovism, aiming to distance what they do from what, as noted earlier, is traditionally seen as a feminine activity (Ketchum, 2005). Conversely, women featured in cooking shows are often symbolically tied to the domestic sphere and caregiving. Instead of wearing a chef's uniform, they are depicted in aprons; rather than preparing complex and innovative meals, they share traditional home-made recipes, rather than cooking in a professional stainless-steel kitchen, they use a more familiar, domestic style set. Once again, cooking is not presented as a professional activity for women, but as a natural everyday practice connected to the roles of wife and mother (Stagi, 2016).

When we shift the focus from the private to the professional sphere it is thus possible to observe how the kitchen suddenly and paradoxically becomes a male-dominated field distinguished by multiple barriers to women's participation.

The above can be read as a process of differentiation of the culinary profession based on gender. Professional differentiation changes structural positions, working conditions and professional relations, and requires new analytical approaches (Maestripietri and Bellini, 2023). It can be observed in three dimensions: differentiation 'within', which concerns the internal diversification of occupations; differentiation 'between', which analyses the distances between occupational groups linked to institutional factors; and differentiation 'beyond', which examines the role of occupations in social change. These processes generate heterogeneity, making professionals increasingly diverse in terms of status, social origin and work patterns. Understanding these transformations is crucial for interpreting the new configurations of professional work (Parding et al., 2021).

This study focuses on processes of professional differentiation *within* the kitchens of institutional catering, an environment that has not been extensively explored from a gender perspective (Vancil-Leap, 2016). These kitchens not only meet dietary needs but, in many cases, also align with specific prosocial goals, such as caring for fragile or sensitive populations like children in schools or elderly in hospitals and retirement homes, or providing services to workers as part of corporate benefits.

The main objective of this analysis is to understand the impact on gendered roles and careers when professional kitchens incorporate prosocial goals and functions related to

caregiving, and by extension to practices and values culturally associated with femininity (Vancil-Leap, 2017).

The research explores how such goals and functions influence gender roles and gendered dynamics in professional kitchens and analyses whether they open opportunities for balancing gender inequalities in the professional cooking sector.

### 3. Methodology: ethnographic research behind the kitchens' doors

The methodology employed in this research is predominantly qualitative, as it aligns with our objective of gaining a deep understanding of individuals' lived experiences and to explore gender dynamics within institutional catering (Semi, 2010). Specifically, the aim is to explore the 'how' of women's trajectories behind kitchen's doors. To achieve this, we employed ethnographic research, which entails immersing oneself in a social context through continuous observation while systematically recording what is seen, heard, and understood (Fassin, 2013). We conducted a case study between February and April 2024 on an institutional catering company operating multiple cooking centres. The case study approach consists in the in-depth analysis of the properties of a single case or phenomenon through a process-tracing approach with the aim of reconstructing the phenomenon's underlying causes or internal dynamics (Gerring, 2004). This approach focuses on the micro level, allowing to explore 'how' and 'why' certain phenomena occur. While findings based on a single case study cannot be immediately generalized, their transferability is ensured by a careful contextualization of the case, detailed description of methods and processes, and theoretical reasoning that allows comparison with similar contexts (Steinberg, 2015). The initial phase, as described by Semi (2010), involved what could be likened to 'the first day of school' in each canteen, followed by the process of negotiating and rethinking one's role within the field. Observations were carried out openly, with all participants informed of the research objectives and the researcher's role.

Focusing on the experiences of women within the cooperatives facilitated a close examination of their movements in the workspace, their activities, interactions, decision-making processes, and, where possible, the motivations underlying their choices. Informal conversations, characterized by immediacy, spontaneity, and directness, proved to be a crucial aspect of the research. These exchanges provided deeper insight into the beliefs, feelings, decision-making criteria, and relational dynamics that shaped the workplace environment (Cardano, 2014).

As highlighted in numerous methodological texts (Becker *et al.*, 2012; Maxwell, 2013), ethnography offers direct access to the complexities and contradictions of the studied reality, but it also involves risks. In our case, the person who made the observations was a 33-year-old woman of Italian origin with a young child. This certainly allowed her access to the field observed in a different way than a man or an older woman would have had. She found it easy to establish rapport with working mothers and fathers, but more difficult with management, with whom she could only interact through formal interviews. The only manager she was able to work alongside during her observations was a woman. Conversely, her Italian background made it challenging for her to develop closer relationships with foreign workers, who viewed Italian as merely a lingua franca and were unable to express themselves fully through it. In general, researchers must carefully balance the need for engagement and identification with participants against the objectivity required

**Table 1.** Interviewees' profile within workers of *Ristorazione Company*.

Interviewee	Gender	Role
Interviewee 1	Male	Production Manager, Branch
Interviewee 2	Female	Administrative Employee
Interviewee 3	Female	Food Control
Interviewee 4	Male	Safety Manager
Interviewee 5	Male	IT Systems
Interviewee 6	Female	Finance and Control Manager
Interviewee 7	Female	Employee
Interviewee 8	Female	Human Resources
Interviewee 9	Female	Cook Centre Reservations
Interviewee 10	Male	Human Resources
Interviewee 11	Female	Credit Recovery
Interviewee 12	Female	Technical Office
Interviewee 13	Male	Administrative Employee
Interviewee 14	Female	Marketing
Interviewee 15	Female	Administrative Employee
Interviewee 16	Male	Executive
Interviewee 17	Female	President

for analysis. Maintaining this balance between participant observation and observant participation is challenging but essential.

To complement the ethnographic observations and provide a broader perspective on the research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 workers from the company under study (6 men and 11 women), selected through a snowball sampling process with the aim of ensuring diversity in our sample, in order to gather as many perspectives as possible. As shown in [Table 1](#), our respondents differ in terms of gender, role, workplace, and expertise (Corbetta, 2015).

The interviews were conducted during the fieldwork with each interview lasting between 15 and 35 min. The interviews were transcribed and analysed. The results of the fieldwork are presented in the following sections.

#### 4. Key findings and discussion

Founded in 1975, *Ristorazione Company* is a company specialized in institutional catering services, with multiple facilities across Italy. *Ristorazione Company* operates in various sectors, including corporate catering, school catering, elderly catering, hospital catering, catering in commercial premises, and self-service areas. The research presented in this article focuses on the fieldwork conducted in one of the company's facilities located in the North of Italy. The decision to anonymize the case study and to not disclose its precise location aims to safeguard the privacy of the workers who participated in the research: even if access to the case study has been negotiated with the company and observations have been conducted openly, the in-depth analysis of everyday interactions and organizational hierarchies combined with the specific distribution of roles and tasks in the company, could expose sensitive information and potentially compromise participants.

#### 4.1. Vertical gender segregation

*Ristorazione Company* is a large enterprise with diverse job roles. Despite being a female-dominated reality, notable gender differences in job positions persist. When focusing on kitchen staff, three main occupations emerge: kitchen assistants, cooks, and chefs. Kitchen assistants provide foundational operational support. Their work focuses on activities related to the *mise en place* (e.g. washing, trimming, and portioning raw ingredients), basic food processing, and sanitation tasks, including dishwashing and surface decontamination. Cooks are responsible for preparing specific parts of the menu (i.e. starters, main course, desserts) at designated stations. Core activities include advanced *mise en place*, time-sensitive cooking, and adapt to customer requests or specific situations. They manage station organization, uphold temperature and hygiene standards, and coordinate closely with the pass station to synchronize ticket timing. The role emphasizes technical expertise, situational awareness, and effective intra-team communication to ensure consistent product quality and service flow. The sous chef functions as the kitchen's deputy manager and quality controller. Beyond direct culinary production, this role integrates operational oversight – coordinating shifts, delegating prep lists, monitoring inventory and waste, and training junior staff. Chefs are internally distinguished between sous chefs and head chefs. Sous chefs enforce food-safety, calibrate portioning and presentation across stations, and intervene to resolve bottlenecks during service. They act as the principal proxy for the head chef, ensuring continuity of standards, cost control, and staff performance in daily operations. Head chefs provide strategic and creative leadership. They design menus and recipes, set sensory and plating standards, and align purchasing and supplier relations with budgetary targets and sustainability goals. Responsibilities encompass workforce planning (recruitment, mentoring, scheduling), cross-departmental coordination with front-of-house management, and oversight of compliance frameworks (food safety, occupational health). Head chefs translate organizational objectives – profitability, brand positioning, and customer satisfaction – into operational practices. In the company observed, women are the majority in absolute terms (see Table 2). Amongst kitchen assistants, 91.5% are female. For cooks, 72.4% of catering assistants are women. About 9.8% of sous-chefs are female. At the chef level, the proportion of women decreases to 51.4%.

In order to understand internal hierarchies and the unbreakability of the glass ceiling, it is useful to compare these absolute values with the total number of male and female workers in *Ristorazione Company*. Despite women representing the 73.7% of the total workforce in kitchens of the company, only 4.6% of them holds positions of power, compared to 15% of men. This disparity highlights gender imbalances in career

**Table 2.** Job positions in kitchen by gender, absolute value.

Job Position	Female	Male
Kitchen Assistant	162	15
Cook	215	82
Sous-Chef	3	28
Head Chef	18	17
<i>Total</i>	398	142

Source: Field notes.

**Table 3.** Contract type by sex, absolute value, '*Ristorazione Company*'.

	Full-Time	Part-Time
Males	162	72
Females	162	1390
<i>Total</i>	324	1462

Source: Field notes.

progression within the culinary field and raises concerns about the so-called glass ceiling: an invisible, structural barrier within hierarchies that restricts the upward mobility of members of disadvantaged groups – most commonly women – despite comparable human capital and performance (Purcell et al., 2010).

Observations and interviews have further revealed that in medium to large kitchen facilities such as the ones operating canteens for workers or used solely for the production of meals to be outsourced, chefs are predominantly male, particularly in managerial roles and positions that involve direct food preparation. In contrast, female chefs are primarily employed in school canteens, which are usually smaller in size and, as we will discuss later, more symbolically connected to traditional female roles. Overall, men are not only more likely to hold managerial positions but their responsibilities are also perceived as more substantial. This is because they typically oversee larger cooking facilities that serve a dual function: outsourcing meals to external locations while simultaneously managing an on-site kitchen for canteen services. In relation to inequalities in access to management positions, interviews have highlighted a difference in the distribution of part-time jobs between men and women. Due to the company's specific field most of the work is concentrated in the morning hours, up to lunchtime. This has led to an extensive use of part-time contracts whose distribution is, however, not balanced between genders. Part-time contracts are more commonly requested by and attributed to women, while most men have full-time contracts as shown by Table 3.

About 69.3% of male workers hold full-time contracts, compared to only 10.4% of female workers. This imbalance – which is obviously connected also to out-of-work inequalities in care duties distribution between genders – impacts also on the possibility of achieving managerial roles due to the persisting idea – diffused amongst both male and female workers – that these positions require full-time presence and availability.

I think it is normal that if you have a part-time contract - which is very common here because of the working hours - you have less chance of making a career. In other words, I believe that those who have a full-time contract have careers and more responsibility everywhere, not those who have a part-time contract. Interviewee 8, Female

We are not a non-profit organisation. I fully understand all the needs related to maternity and that is why we have many part-time employees. At the same time, however, we have to bear in mind that as a company we have to guarantee a service and it is inevitable that I will tend to trust those who guarantee a greater presence. Interviewee 10, Male

The interviews highlight that the prevailing rhetoric within the company is: 'if you work less, it is normal that you will have fewer opportunities for career advancement'. This rhetoric operates as a powerful mechanism for maintaining the glass ceiling, because due

to the lack of recognition of care work as proper work, people with care responsibilities – implicitly assumed to be women – are perceived as working less and thus less deserving of professional recognition. Overall, this leads to the emergence of a company culture that frames part-time as a ‘women’s thing’ rather than an organizational arrangement aimed at promoting work-life balance for everyone (Maestriperi & León, 2019).

#### 4.2. Professional differentiation and gendered dynamics

The qualitative fieldwork allowed us to go beyond the kitchen doors and to highlight how occupational differentiations are shaped by gender stereotypes. The analysis of the organization of kitchens revealed that certain tasks and places are considered ‘more suited’ to traits traditionally associated with femininity, while others are associated with traits deemed typically masculine.

This differentiation can be observed, for example, at the special level: the section of the cooking centre equipped with stoves and burners, where the main courses are prepared, is reserved to men. This division is justified primarily on the basis of the physical demands and risks associated with this area of work, which requires, for example, the handling of high-temperature tools.

One of the chefs responsible for preparing the main courses, speaking about his position, tells me ‘Here you have to be able to work under pressure. There is really more physical fatigue, but also mental fatigue, because these are the main dishes and we have time pressure. At the moment of service, it feels like hell and there are really high temperatures’ - I can already feel the heat as I talk to one of the male chefs before the service starts. He adds that this is why, in his opinion, they are all male: ‘You need more physical and mental stamina’. He then alludes to the fact that female cooks tend not to be able to cope with the pressure. Field Note

A second recurring rationale used to explain why men predominantly oversee the main course section relates to the high pressure and fast-paced nature of this area of work.

I am in one of the company’s kitchens during a lunch shift. which feels more like an obstacle run between the female workers, and meet a male cook, who is in charge of preparing first courses and is finishing his shift. I ask him about his day. ‘The usual hell’, he says. He adds, ‘We need at least one more cook<sup>2</sup>’. ‘Would a female cook?’ I ask. ‘No nonsense, we need men for this role. The women here are just pretending to be cooks, but we need real cooks. It’s harsh to say, but when I’m in a hurry, I want to be able to tell you to f\*ck off without you getting upset. With women, it’s all drama and big melodramas’. Field Note

Conversely, three sections of the kitchen are almost exclusively ‘female spaces’: the kitchen for special diets (e.g. gluten-free diets or diets for people with allergies), the kitchen for side dishes, and the kitchen for cold dishes.

Concerning the special diets kitchen, it seems that being female is almost a prerequisite for working in this context. Characteristics such as precision and attention are deemed as necessary to work in this department and, for the participants, the more precise ‘nature’ of women explains the total absence of men in this specific section of the kitchen.

One cook working in special diet preparation tells me: ‘The special diets area requires attention, patience, and precision: we can’t afford to make even a small mistake, it’s very

important. So, I think that in this area, the preparation of special diets, we are only women because we are more precise'. Field note

Both special diets and side dish preparation are also described as 'quieter' work; meaning sections of the kitchen where rhythms are slower. Special diets and side and cold dishes preparation are generally considered tasks that require a less pressured approach, and are therefore perceived as something that also women can easily do.

These spatial divisions mirror hierarchical distinctions as the preparation of the main courses is symbolically more central to the primary purpose of the observed job – providing food – than the preparation of side dishes and special diets.

These spatial and hierarchical divisions do not appear in the school canteens. In this specific service, the chefs, cooks and assistant cooks are all women. Unsurprisingly, the research reveals a diffused belief that women's 'innate maternal sensibility' makes women staff better equipped to work with children.

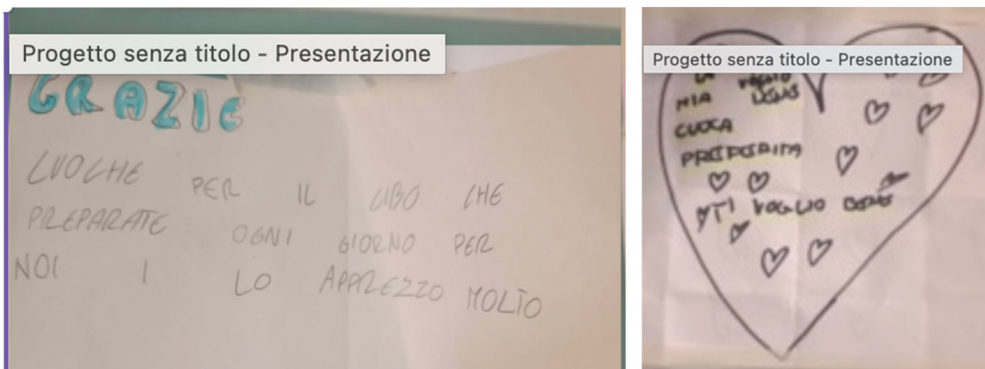
Women in schools conveys a sense of motherhood. The school cook is a woman, a mother.  
Interview 26

Women are considered more suited to work with children also because, like many other female-dominated works – it requires a high level of emotional involvement. The cooks working in these kitchens, for example, not only know the names and needs of all the children in the school but also establish relationships with the children.

I'm with Giulia in a primary school canteen next to the dining hall, where lunch is served in two shifts from 12:00 to 13:30 to children. There are six women working here; two of them are cooks who come in early to prepare the meals before the service. I'm in the kitchen with them, and the work seems much more relaxed compared to what I've seen in self-service or larger kitchen centres. One cook tells me [...] that being a cook in a school cafeteria is not just about cooking; it also involves connecting with the children: feeding them, knowing who has specific needs, who is absent today, or who is eating plain food. Field Note

The following field note, collected during a day in a school canteen, also confirms the relevance of emotional labour in work with children.

There is an emotional aspect to the work that is required. I get a chance to experience this first-hand. After the dining hall is set up, the first classes begin to arrive. I'm also wearing the uniform, with a hairnet, a coat, and work shoes, and unlike the other staff, I'm not serving meals, clearing tables, or bringing bread. And most importantly, I'm 'the new cook'. Immediately, the children from the first class show curiosity about my presence and begin to ask me about my name, what I do, what fruit will be served, and whether I'll be there the next day. It's impossible to go unnoticed in their eyes, and I have no trouble believing that this type of work requires emotional involvement and greater interaction. This is also reflected in the many handwritten messages and drawings posted on the walls by the children to their cooks. Field Note



Legend: Both are drawings written by children and hung on the door of a school cafeteria kitchen. The first image from the left says, 'THANK YOU COOKS FOR THE FOOD YOU PREPARE FOR US EVERY DAY, I APPRECIATE IT VERY MUCH'. The second image says, 'YOU ARE MY FAVORITE COOK. I LOVE YOU'.

Requiring emotional work, working with children is perceived as a women's task by the organizations providing the service, the users of the service, as well as by the women cooks themselves. This leads to a gendered task assignment and evaluative advantages for women in emotion-intensive roles shaped by stereotypes rather than by inherent ability (Erickson, 2005; Heilman et al., 2024).

Considering the findings of a research conducted in school cafeterias, Vancil-Leap argues that the relational work involved in working with children is constant, cognitively demanding and performed simultaneously with hot-line production and safety tasks – yet it is weakly specified in job descriptions, rarely captured by time sheets or KPIs, and seldom acknowledged as a relevant skill.

This combination of simultaneous performance and low formal recognition marks it as extra labour rather than merely an inherent aspect of cooking. Indeed, in school canteens, cooks are not only responsible for the safe and timely production and distribution of meals but they are also constantly engaged in managing relationships with (and between) children: they learn names and preferences, encourage hesitant eaters, de-escalate conflict, respond to distress and enforce fairness at the queue, while coordinating themselves with the teachers.

We are tidying up after serving lunch in the school cafeteria. The cook laughs as she comments on how precious silence is after all the shouting during the previous two hours. While washing up in the kitchen, they comment on the children's meals with phrases such as 'Giulia really didn't feel like eating meat today' or, sarcastically, 'it's strange that Pietro didn't eat any fish'. She looks at me and says, 'Anyway, there's not much we can do about it. As I told you, and as I think you've seen, we're not just cooks, like in work canteens. We deal with children, and they love us. I think that few male chefs would be capable of doing this kind of double job, because they—meaning male chefs—are not very interested in the emotional aspect'. Field note

Also in this case, female cooks appear to have internalized recurring rhetorics of the masculine order (Bourdieu, 1998): when asked about the emotional and relational work they perform in school canteen, they tend to romanticize it and to suggest that they, and not men, are better suited to this type of (extra) work.

### 4.3. Gendered socialization and career outcomes in professional kitchens

The paradox of the professional kitchen concerns not only who performs the work but how it is valued: when cooking is professionalized, kitchens tend to become male-dominated; even in institutional catering, where women are the majority, men disproportionately occupy the more prestigious leadership roles. Despite enjoying higher recognition than women and better opportunity to reach positions of leadership, men working in institutional catering seems to share an idea about this type of kitchen as a working space less prestigious than a restaurant. In this perspective, they elaborate a series of rhetoric to justify their presence in this less valued sector.

While talking to a male chef in charge of the first courses, he tells me: 'I came here after working for 5 years in a Michelin-starred restaurant: a different level and pace. But then new life demands came up, in my case the second child and the fact that my partner needed more help. So now I'm home every night'. I didn't ask him, but it's the first thing he tells me. Field Note

He tells me that he had to settle for this job despite studying a lot because he had a child, so he's closer to home and doesn't work in the evening. Immediately after, I speak with a female cook working with side dishes. She is young, 29 years old, and also trained in hospitality. She tells me she is happy with her job and proud of it, and that becoming an employee has given her access to welfare services that help her a lot with her children. Field Note

In the narratives of the female workers, being a cook in a canteen or cooking centre is described as 'an opportunity for growth', as 'the possibility of doing this job despite having children'. For men, it is almost as an emasculation.

The difference emerging between men and women is partly related to the meaning attributed to work on the basis of gender stereotypes, but also to the path they have taken to get there. Indeed, the observations have highlighted another important aspect related to the career paths of male and female chefs, which concerns the type of socialization at work. While all men had previously worked in the culinary sector and usually in restaurants, the female chefs I spoke to had almost always worked in *Ristorazione Company*.

It was *Ristorazione Company* that took me by the hand and brought me this far. Dialogue taken from a Field Note

The chef tells me it wasn't a surprise to take on this role. She practically grew up in *Ristorazione Company* and saw it as a natural progression. Field Note

In this perspective, male chef's negative representations of their current jobs are usually based on a comparison with previous experience, while women – who commonly enjoy less opportunity than men in the job market – tends to have a positive representation of this job. Female chefs are therefore grateful for the same work that their male colleagues complain about, and thus for doing jobs that male chefs do not want to do.

Another difference emerges in the career paths of women and men: while for female employees the birth of a child corresponds to a reduction (or cessation) of working hours, for men it seems to lead to a slowing down of the pace of work, but not to a reduction in working hours. In both cases of chef fathers observed, the event of fatherhood (the birth of a first or second child) requires a job closer to home and without evening shifts, which is for male employees interviewed less prestigious than the previous one.

## 5. Conclusion

While cooking is often associated with women in the private sphere, research suggests that professionalization often involves a process of masculinization of this activity, as well as different power dynamics. Although women's presence in professional kitchen is still higher than men's, the latter dominate senior positions and women remain underrepresented in leadership roles within kitchen brigades.

This study has analysed women's work in the institutional catering sector. Our findings highlight the persistence of gender inequalities even in institutional catering; a specific area of work which, carrying out a mainly social function, appears to be symbolically more associated with care work and thus with femininity. Indeed, institutional catering's main targets are often vulnerable groups such as patients in hospitals, elderly people in nursery homes or children in school canteens and the closer the interaction between kitchen staff and vulnerable clients, the more the work is perceived as traditionally feminine. We showed that gendered hierarchies are reproduced across the brigade – amongst cooks, sous-chefs, and chefs – through vertical segregation, spatial/task segregation, and contract regimes that differentially constrain women's progression. Women predominate numerically in cooking roles but are clustered in 'care-adjacent' stations (e.g. special diets, sides, cold prep, school canteens) and part-time contracts, while men concentrate around fire/stove lines and in managerial coordination, especially in large production centres; these patterns help explain why men are over-represented in roles with budgetary control, scheduling authority, and technical prestige. A significant finding concerns the distribution of power. Although there are more female chefs than male chefs, there is a clear gender imbalance in managerial positions. There are also differences in employment contracts: only 10.4% of female employees have a full-time contract. This discrepancy is likely to be influenced by both the nature of the job – work in the canteens mainly takes place during lunchtime and, including preparation, this translates into part-time work – and the need for women to combine work with family responsibilities. Many women workers reported that part-time employment was necessary for childcare. However, this employment structure limits women's access to managerial positions and hinders career advancement.

There is also a clear professional differentiation based on gender. Men are typically responsible for preparing food over fire, while women are mainly responsible for cold dishes, side dishes and special diets. All cooks assigned to prepare special diets are women, as this task requires attention to detail and precision, traits traditionally associated with women. In addition, men tend to work in mixed-sex canteens or large cooking centres that prepare meals for external distribution. Job roles correspond to deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, with work assignments based on perceived gender characteristics. This gendered perception of work influences the allocation of jobs, reinforcing traditional roles. Another notable observation is that female kitchen workers report more workplace conflict than their male counterparts. Many female workers expressed a preference for working with men, whom they perceived as more pragmatic and less prone to workplace drama.

Our results are in dialogue with research on professional kitchen cultures as hyper-masculinized organizations that valorize endurance, command, and hazard-proximate skill (Harris & Giuffre, 2015), while reclassifying precision, patience, and relational labour

as merely 'personal' attributes. They also align with theories of professional differentiation that track how status boundaries are made and remade within occupations (e.g. station assignments), between organizational fields (e.g. school canteen kitchens), and beyond professions as they intersect with social change (Maestriperi & Bellini, 2023). In line with stereotype-to-bias pathways (Heilman et al., 2024), we observed how prescriptive beliefs ('women are better suited to special diets/children') shape task allocation and performance evaluation. Finally, our observations in school canteens reaffirm that emotional and relational work – documented in studies of 'feeding labor' (Vancil-Leap, 2016, 2017) – is continuous, cognitively demanding, and weakly recognized in job descriptions, thereby remaining extra labour that sustains service quality without yielding commensurate status or pay.

Generalization is simple in our case: not all kitchens will be organized in this way, but even in the kitchens observed, gender imbalances already known in the literature emerge.

Male-dominated workplaces present significant barriers for women, including limited career progression, discriminatory practices and gendered power structures. However, even in predominantly female workplaces, such as institutional catering, gender differences are clearly evident, particularly in terms of the difficulty of breaking through the glass ceiling, professional differentiation based on gender beliefs and stereotypes, and the differentiation of individual career paths between male and female chefs. Perceptions and choices of female workers suggest how deeply internalized these differences are, influencing also their internal conversation and positioning.

The case study selected extends gender–profession debates by showing how prosocial mission – central to institutional catering – does not necessarily de-masculinize prestige but instead relocates prestige to technically coded spaces (hot line, centralized production) and managerial coordination (sous-chef/chef oversight), while naturalizing women's concentration in relationally intensive stations. This helps explain the coexistence of female majorities amongst cooks with male advantages amongst sous-chefs and chefs and clarifies why part-time/shift architecture functions as a meso-level mechanism of glass-ceiling reproduction in service kitchens.

Despite this, it is appropriate to mention here the limitations of our research. This is a single-company case based on time-bounded observations; findings should be read as theoretically generative rather than statistically representative. Crucially, we could not observe intersections (e.g. migration status, ethnicity, class) in sufficient depth to analyse how they shape access to stations, contract types, or promotion amongst cooks, sous-chefs, and chefs. The absence of sustained intersectional observation is a key limitation of this study, and we anticipate that closer attention to these dynamics will complicate and refine our account.

Future work should overcome this gap, pursuing intersectional ethnographies that follow workers over time to capture how migration, class, and race articulate with gender across hiring, scheduling, and station assignment, exploring how race, class and gender intersect to shape workplace hierarchies. For example, migrant women often occupy the most precarious and underpaid positions in canteens. Their migrant status increases their vulnerability to exploitation and discrimination in terms of pay and working conditions. Similarly, the intersection of gender and class is crucial in understanding why working-class women are disproportionately represented in lower paid roles. These are preliminary considerations that emerge from our observations, but we have not gathered enough

evidence to generalize and offer interpretative keys. Finally, a new challenge for social research concerns the possibility of identifying factors, processes and situation where new narratives possibly get on stage, opening the way for a gender (re)balancing.

## Notes

1. Bravado is one of the well-known characteristics of machismo. This term is used to describe the overconfidence and outrageous vanity typical of machismo.
2. In Italian the word 'cook' in this case is not gender neutral.

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## Author contributions

CRedit: **Rebecca Paraciani**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Ilaria Pitti**: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Alessandro Martelli**: Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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