

**FOOD**

# Here's Why Our Food Systems Are a Central Feminist Issue

*Three out of four American vegans are women. So is food a feminist issue?*

By [Melissa Kravitz](#) / [Independent Media Institute](#)

July 27, 2018, 9:30 PM GMT

[18 COMMENTS](#)

[Seventy-four percent of American vegans are female](#), but is there any link between veganism and feminism? Superficially, one could look at decades of mass marketing meat, grills and other fire-and-flesh fueled products to men, infusing these inanimate culinary products with gender—but, speaking as a woman who loves steak (eating it, cooking it, all of it) and as a person with common sense, foods in and of themselves should not appeal to one gender identity or another. One could point to the surge of female-led steakhouses and [butcher shops](#)—like New York’s White Gold Butchers—as exemplary evidence that women of all kinds love meat, but veganism (for many) [isn’t necessarily about a like or dislike of animal products](#). So why are three out of every four vegans female?



Photo Credit: SweetPotatoSoul (YouTube)

“For some feminists, especially those who might identify as ecofeminists, veganism is inextricably linked to feminism,” explains Deborah Cohan, associate professor of sociology at University of South Carolina-Beaufort. “From this perspective, the oppression of women is tied to other forms of oppression, particularly the abuse of the environment and non-human animals.”

Some of this ideology stems from Carol Adams’ 1990 landmark book, [The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory](#), which links not eating animal products to opposing the patriarchy. “In the book, Adams makes the case that eating an animal for food involves first seeing the animal as an object, as

something that is inferior and of little value and that this is a violent form of objectification, akin to how women are also objectified, sexualized, animalized, degraded, hurt and sometimes killed,” Cohan explains. “Feminists who are vegan generally regard their decisions around food to be a certain kind of protest and resistance to all forms of violence and cruelty.”

SPONSORED



The concept of animal rights and environmental conservation also historically, and ideologically, overlaps. “Both the animal rights movement and the environmental movement were established by women who strategically employed stereotypes about women’s proper role in nurturing and caring,” explains sociologist Corey Lee Wrenn, author of [A Rational Approach to Animal Rights](#) and founder of [Vegan Feminist Network](#). “At the time, this strategy was necessary for women to gain access to the public sphere since women were expected to remain in the home and were generally barred from political participation. For better or for worse, this female association remains linked with the movements today.” How so? Wrenn says that it’s been shown that environmental nonprofit brands, logos and campaigns that are “perceived to be too effeminate” will receive less support from men. This relates back to how women and men are socialized to consume different categories of items, with veganism’s rejection of the consumption of animal products equating to rejecting being dominant over animals, and therefore, less masculine.

Vegan cookbook author, chef and restaurateur Isa Chandra Moskowitz, who owns Brooklyn’s Modern Love, a vegan restaurant serving smoked walnut chorizo nachos with cashew queso as well as a “bacon cheeseburger,” has been a vegan for almost 30 years. “A love for animals made me want to be vegan,” Moskowitz says. “I just love animals and don’t want to eat them. I view a cow the same way I view a dog, a pig like an octopus.” Moskowitz’s care for animals sprouted at the same time she started to become a feminist, when she was a teenager, and she personally connects the two ideologies.

"I think that any situation where you're in a position of power, you should use your power for good," she says. "Just as I would expect someone with a lot of privilege to not be sexist and help people, I have the privilege to help animals. All oppression is related: If I want to stop people from abusing their power, why would I abuse my power?" In her daily life, Moskowitz does what she can to stop any harm, of animals and other people, and believes that if you're protesting oppression, you should protest all types of oppression.

Being a vegan, of course, does not necessarily make one a feminist, but the values of both ideologies mesh in the way that, theoretically, any group opposed to oppression of any person or species can understand. It doesn't hurt to point out that many of the animals we exploit and use for food production are in fact female: Cows and other female livestock provide milk and red meat; female chickens lay eggs and are typically sold by parts in American supermarkets; sows (female pigs) [are commonly turned into bacon](#) and pork chops, while males, boars, are used for breeding. Bull meat, rooster meat and flesh of other male animals are rarely seen on Western menus, making the argument that our food system treats female and male animals unequally, letting the males live to continue their lineage while the female are killed, split apart and sold to consume. In a food system so detached from its origins—[very few Americans raise or slaughter](#) their own meat—it's easy to forget these gender disparities in the way that we have been trained to prefer eating female animals over males.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, men may not be vegans because there are social pressures and assumptions that men eat meat. A lot of meat. [American men eat 57 percent more meat](#) than American women. Popular culture has illustrated for us that men eat burgers and chicken and bacon while women order salad. "The masculine meat connection is linked to a hunter-gatherer mentality and to beliefs that meat will make a person stronger," Cohan says. A Cornell University study showed the [inextricable link between men and meat](#), and [another study](#), published in the journal *Appetite*, showed that vegetarian men are thought to be 35 percent less masculine than their meat-eating peers. This is all, of course, ridiculous; your diet does not determine your gender. But decades of marketing, media and implicit bias have led to these harmful thought patterns—harmful in that gender binary should not determine our diets, and in that [eating red meat can be unhealthy](#) and is indisputably [horrible for the environment](#).

Like many industries, the food industry is notoriously difficult for women to thrive in, and Moskowitz doesn't believe that being a vegan helps her in the food industry—she's witnessed journalists asking her and her vegan male

counterparts subtly sexist questions, inquiring what the male chef would do with a beet while asking her for home cooking advice. Her restaurant, [Modern Love](#), is woman-run, and women are plentiful in the kitchen, but still, there are setbacks.

"Being a vegan is an added challenge," she says. "Chefs like Amanda Cohen [who runs a vegetarian restaurant] should get more recognition, but if people are talking about vegan chefs, they're talking about men. In this industry, [people often] don't give women authority."

Still, with such a large contingent of vegans being female, there's more space for women to support other women. A worldwide cohort of [vegan female chefs](#) is promoting the eco-friendly, cruelty-free values of veganism by simply preparing great, animal-free food. In some ways, this niche of the food world, often stigmatized to be a woman's facet, leaves room for women to innovate and grow.

Female empowerment, on the other hand, is not necessarily linked to diet, but rather the specific choices and actions women take. Veganism intersects with these choices and actions, by protesting the oppression of the voiceless (animals), making veganism an inherently feminist diet choice. As gender binaries begin to break down, and a new, socially conscious generation rises in the ranks, the ideals of veganism and feminism can remain intact, while expanding their reach. [Millennials are adapting plant-based diets](#) at a faster pace than other generations, and [more millennials identify as feminists](#) than in any other generation, so the two movements continue to grow as people adopt more conscientious ideologies and lifestyles.

"Sadly, it generally requires male participation in a social phenomenon for it to gain legitimacy. The animal rights movement is fully aware of this," Wrenn says. "Sociologists and gender studies scholars have uncovered intentional strategizing in the animal rights/vegan movement to downplay femininity, promote masculinity, and celebrate male leaders as a deliberate means of achieving credibility in a male-favoring society. However, the fact that men have to be involved to bring legitimacy to a cause demonstrates that we still haven't come to terms with the underlying ideological roots to oppression."

*This article was produced by [Earth | Food | Life](#), a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

**Don't let big tech control what news you see. Get more stories like this in your inbox, every day.**

[Subscribe](#)

[Melissa Kravitz](#) is a writer in New York City who writes about food and culture for First We Feast, Thrillist, Elite Daily, Edible, and other publications.

[SHARE ON FACEBOOK](#)[SHARE ON TWITTER](#)

REPORT TYPOS AND CORRECTIONS TO 'CORRECTIONS@ALTERNET.ORG'.

[18 COMMENTS](#)[WHO WE ARE](#)[WRITER GUIDELINES](#)[CONTACT US](#)[PRIVACY POLICY](#)[PRESS INFORMATION](#)[ADVERTISE ON ALTERNET](#)

Copyright 2018 AlterNet Media - PO Box 21040, Washington, DC 20009