



Care, Gender, and Change in the Study of Sustainable Consumption: A Critical Review of the Literature

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In Western countries, moving toward more sustainable lifestyles often involves the disruption of well-established routines and habits in relation to consumption domains such as food, washing and cleaning, heating and cooling, transportation, and managing “stuff” more generally. These activities are deeply embedded in our everyday lives and often tied to care, which is the work invested in maintaining the well-being of oneself and others. In this paper, we are interested in the ways sustainable consumption and care interlock within the household, how they relate to gender inequalities, and how change toward more sustainable lifestyles can both impact and be impacted by these inequalities. With this in mind, we conducted a critical review of the academic literature by analyzing a corpus of 75 papers on household consumption and sustainability, paying particular attention to the role authors attribute to care and gender. The analysis shines light on the relational character of care and consumption, emphasizing the ways sustainable consumption is dependent on relationships within and outside the home. We suggest that care often acts as a barrier to the establishment of more sustainable consumption practice. Care work, per definition, upholds routines and habits while mobilizing the very resources that are needed to transform them. This insight invites us to rethink the role of households as a site for change. We suggest that the transition toward more sustainable consumption practices within the home relies on reducing and redistributing care work, transforming the world of work, and actively promoting an ethos of care that includes people, other beings, the material world and the planet.

Keywords: sustainable consumption, care, gender, inequalities, everyday life, change, practices

INTRODUCTION

In the efforts to fight climate change and move toward more sustainable societies, households are key sites for intervention (Dubois et al., 2019). However, when it comes to changing consumption habits, they occupy an ambiguous position. On the one hand, changing consumption alone is not enough to achieve the depth of transformation necessary to avoid the worst effects of climate change. It has been demonstrated time and time again that focusing on individuals to change their habits and adopt more sustainable practices does not work, in part because citizens and consumers evolve in a system that precludes them from consuming the way they might want to (Maniates, 2001). And indeed, trying to adopt a sustainable lifestyle in a non-sustainable society tends to involve a lot of work, time, and energy. Putting the onus of solving climate change on individuals

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and consumers has recently been labeled a “discourse of climate delay” (Lamb et al., 2020), a strategy put forward by more powerful actors such as oil companies or governments to redirect responsibility and avoid taking action. On the other hand, as long theorized by Smith (1776), consumption is what drives our economies (Holt and Schor, 2000), and if we are to properly address the climate and environmental crisis as a society, individual practices and household consumption habits do have to change.

In the last 20 years (un)sustainable consumption has developed rapidly as an area of research in social sciences. One contribution of this area of research has been to underline the centrality of non-conspicuous consumption for moving toward more sustainable lifestyles. Loosely organized around social practice theory, this body of literature aims at understanding everyday life, routines, and habits in relation with household consumption, social processes and infrastructure, and the tension between individuals and the collective, all of which underline the centrality of social norms and relationships in performing and reproducing consumption practices (Sahakian, 2019). Through the study of ordinary life, this literature seeks to think about change in consumption practices in the private sphere (one can think of water use and showers, for example) and frame it in terms of a collective process, moving away from individualization and responsabilization. By focusing on routines and habits, rather than on consumer decisions for example, this body of literature also accounts for the fact that sustainable consumption goes beyond pro-environmental behavior at the point of purchase but also in the home, and may encompass all we do that involves the material world.

Most often, research in the area of sustainable consumption focuses on consumerism, overconsumption and “stuff” (Miller, 2010), or on the consumption of energy services (heating, mobility, etc.) and food in daily life. In all these instances, consumption is tied to the way we relate and care for each other. Care practices—provisioning and cooking food, cleaning the house, doing laundry, maintaining comfort of household members—require the use of resources such as food and energy, meaning that they are inevitably transformed by the adoption of more sustainable consumption practices. At the same time, care work is at the core of family life and relationships within the domestic space, and is more often accomplished by women than not (for the province of Québec, Canada, see Crespo, 2018). Therefore, transforming consumption toward more sustainable practices has an impact on care work and gender relations within the home, and might demand the investment of resources such as money and time. For example, moving toward “zero waste” consumption practices might require extra efforts for washing cloth diapers, planning purchases, going to different stores for cleaning products, bulk buying, or carrying reusable containers. Turning to local food or reducing meat consumption can mean changing provisioning habits and invest time, money, and efforts into learning new cooking skills. If the transformation of household consumption toward more sustainable practices takes place without addressing issues of gender inequalities, the new practices, routines and habits created might very well contribute to the further entrenchment of these inequalities,

while creating an impossible programme of action for women to undertake. The literature on sustainable consumption has, for a large part, proved ill-equipped in tackling inequalities and power relationships within and outside the home, a weakness we seek to address by throwing light on the centrality of care in household consumption practices. That being said, questions of gender, inequalities and care in sustainable consumption have been gaining momentum in the last year or so, with several publications on this topic coming out in a short time span, among them the work of Fathallah and Pyakurel (2020), Hargreaves and Middlemiss (2020), Johnson (2020), Lane et al. (2020), Mechlenborg and Gram-Hanssen (2020), or Gram-Hanssen (2021).

In this paper, based on a social practice understanding of consumption, we are interested in the ways sustainable consumption and care interlock within the household, how they relate to gender and inequalities, and how change toward more sustainable lifestyles can both impact and be impacted by these inequalities. To approach this question, we completed a critical review of the literature by analyzing a corpus of 74 papers on household consumption and sustainability, paying particular attention to the role authors attribute to care and gender. Focusing on care led us to underline the centrality of relationships for understanding how gender inequalities and care tend to hinder change and the implementation of more sustainable consumption practices. In the following pages, we will start by presenting a conceptual framework that brings together consumption, care, gender, social practice theory and change, after which we will expose the methodology for building and analyzing a corpus of papers on household sustainable consumption. We will start our presentation of the results by looking at mothering and the way it exemplifies the nexus of care, gender and consumption. Afterwards, we will consider the implications for change of studying sustainable consumption practices and habits as part of care work. In the discussion, we will argue that the way care unfolds within the home generally tends to make more difficult the establishment of more sustainable consumption practices, and put forward suggestions for countering these dynamics.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: CONSUMPTION, CARE AND GENDER IN EVERYDAY LIFE

In this section, we start by defining care and its different forms, before turning our attention to the relationships between care and consumption. We will then discuss the links between gender and sustainability before closing the section with a discussion of social practice approaches and change in practices.

Defining Care

Fisher and Tronto (1991, p. 40) propose to view care as “a *species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible.* That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining

web” (ital. in original). This definition includes, among other things, food work, caring for children, sick, or elderly people, but also caring for spaces, communities, the material world and the environment. Central to this understanding of care are the notions of vulnerability, interdependency and responsibility: we are all vulnerable, but some of us more than others; we all rely on each other, the community, and the material world to exist and thrive; we all give and we all receive care; and, as a consequence, we are all responsible for maintaining and repairing the world, bearing more or less responsibility depending on our respective privileges and capabilities.

In their now-classic definition, Berenice Fisher and Joan C. Tronto identify four interdependent phases of care, which are all necessary for “good” care to happen. The first phase, “caring about,” “involves the recognition in the first place that care is necessary” (Tronto, 1993, p. 106). Indeed, to get involved in care, one must first recognize that care needs to happen. The second phase, “taking care of,” means assuming some responsibility in recognizing the need for care and identifying appropriate solutions, which supposes a considerable level of agency from the person caring. The third phase is “care giving.” It refers to the moment when care needs are met. In the words of Tronto, “[i]t involves physical work, and almost always requires that care-givers come in contact with the objects of care” (1993, p. 107). Finally, “care receiving” entails “that the object of care will respond to the care it receives. For example, the tuned piano sounds good again, the patient feels better, or the starving children seem healthier after being fed” (p. 107). In 2013, Tronto added “caring with” to the original four phases of care, to address questions of justice, equality and freedom for all. Tronto also puts forward other elements that must be taken into account to understand what *good* care is. Among them, she argues that care should be theorized as a practice that involves thoughts and action which are directed toward an end. She also stresses that both needs and care are culturally defined, but the need for care is universal. Finally, and most interestingly for the topic of this paper, good care heavily depends on having access to resources, namely material goods, time and skills (Tronto, 2013, p. 110), without which appropriate caring can’t happen.

How Care Relates to Consumption

Some literature exists on the relationship between care and consumption, which can roughly be separated in two big categories. A first body of works is organized around the issue of care in the marketplace and within economic relationships. This work is mostly interested in ethical consumption and how “caring about” a distant stranger—in this case the people we are related to through their involvement in the value chain—can influence consumer behavior (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000; De Pelsmacker et al., 2005). In doing so, this body of work explores the role of distance in conceptualizing care and, therefore, its relationality. As Smith (1998) and later Popke (2006) put it, “if relations of care are affective, embodied and relational, then an ethics arising out of this would seem to be necessarily partial and situational, holding only for those with whom we have some immediate contact and familiarity” (Popke, 2006, p. 507). The question, then, is that of whether

it is possible to “care about,” “care for,” or extend beneficence to people with whom we have no interaction or relationship beside the one we have through the value chain. Drawing on Tronto, Smith (1998) suggests three ways of extending care to a “distant other” or a more abstract figure. The first one is related to spatial relationships, where being aware of “how ‘we’ in the affluent parts of the world impact on the lives and environments of distant others, can lead to an extension of a sense of responsibility” (p. 21). The second one relates to the ways the recognition of our human similarity, and the similarity between “close and distant others” (Clement, 1996 in Smith, 1998), can drive people to “extend their scope for care” (p. 23). Finally, adopting care as a moral value means engaging in caring relationships in an unconditional way, irrespective of the social or physical distance. The location of the object of care becomes its context rather than a condition or an obstacle, which makes “ethical consumption” possible. In their empirical work on the consumer’s conceptualizations of care, Shaw et al. (2017) show how caring through consumption highlights the interdependencies between consumers, producers, and the stakeholders in between, and how the care for self and the care for others are deeply intertwined, even when the consumer is involved with a distant other. More importantly, they find that the ability to care for “unidentified and distant others” (p. 429) is possible through hope that the process of care will meet actual needs, trust in stakeholders involved such as distributors or labels, and respect for the care receivers. As such, and in relation to the concerns underlined by Popke and Smith, caring for a distant other through ethical consumption is not only possible, but also an embodied and affected phenomenon.

The second body of work is closer to the main object of this paper and studies care and consumption in relation to social reproduction (Popke, 2006), which refers to our everyday lives, the private sphere, the home, or “maintaining our world.” Moving away from matters of ethical consumption, which is mostly concerned with economic relationships, this literature questions how certain acts of care rely on consumption and how consumption can also be an act of care. In her ethnographic study of household energy demand in the UK, Moroşanu (2016) forges the concept of the Mother-Multiple, where (mostly) women occupy a specific ontological position characterized by a mode of being centered around acts of care for family members, pets, and the home itself. For the Mother-Multiple, care can happen through consumption practices such as boiling water, cooking food, or leaving the lights on in anticipation of the return of a family member. It involves the anticipation of needs, habits, preferences, and dislikes of “domestic others” and, consequently, a great knowledge of the people and spaces she is caring for. For Moroşanu and the women she interviewed, becoming one another’s “Mother-Multiple” would, through global justice and a decrease of overconsumption, pave the way toward a sustainable future. In this line of thought, Hall (2011) theorizes consumption as a fundamentally moral act, “a means of expressing our moral identities and an outlet for ethical obligations” (p. 628). She argues that consumption is interwoven with “caring work” and is part of everyday practices that are ethical by nature, as they involve multiple “acts of care” performed to address family

members' needs. In other words, she argues that multiple ethics of care meet in everyday consumption practices, in relation to caring for oneself, for the family or for the environment.

In building her argument, Hall highlights the definition of shopping crafted by Daniel Miller, which frames it in terms of love and care and includes the notion of responsibility. In Miller's view, shopping is "the activity you undertake nearly every day in order to obtain goods for those people for whom you are responsible—the goods you and they eat, wear and employ in a multitude of tasks" (Miller, 1998a, p. 2). In this definition, consumption is understood as part of social reproduction processes. It is seen as an act of care in and of itself, inextricable from our relationships, everyday needs, and the responsibilities we hold to one another. Within the marketplace, consumption has also been conceptualized as a way to build self-identity and communicate this identity to others. According to consumer culture theory, the marketplace produces "consumer positions that consumers can choose to inhabit" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 871). From their consumer positions, individuals mobilize the symbolic and material resources offered by the marketplace for forming a coherent sense of self and expressing their identity, along with establishing and maintaining relationships (Catulli et al., 2017). This is especially true for family relationships. In fact, as Miller (1998b, p. 92) writes, "'family shopping' is one of the key contexts in which the relationship between consumption and identity is currently being forged." Consumption offers ways to create cohesion and stronger ties within the family, or "feelings of solidarity and bonding" (Belk, 2010, p. 717), which are especially salient in the context of care giving. This happens mostly through sharing and gift-giving, where sharing is defined as "the act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use and/or the act and process of receiving or taking something from others for our use" (Belk, 2010, p. 717). Belk considers mothering as one prototype of sharing, as childcare is given freely and does not carry expectations of reciprocity. In this sense, consumption carries symbolic meanings that feeds in existing caring relationships, while also reinforcing gender roles and inequalities.

Gender, Sustainability, and Everyday Life

Historically, consumption and political consumerism have been a space of action and a "tool for change" for women (Micheletti, 2003, p. 37), who were in many ways excluded from the public spaces and democratic processes. Today, household consumption remains a gendered territory, and so does what Dzialo (2017, p. 434) calls "private-sphere environmental behaviors," meaning that in general, women report higher engagement in pro-environmental behavior than men, across socioeconomic status (Kennedy and Kmec, 2018). Within feminist scholarship, there is a long tradition of connecting gender, sustainability and everyday life. One vision, developed in the 1990s, is that by virtue of their social position, daily caring practices and mothering, women have a deeper understanding of nature, and are thus more likely to care for it (e.g. Merchant, 1996). This rhetoric has been heavily criticized, as it is viewed to essentialize women, in relation to both their biological or

social realities. MacGregor calls "ecomaternalism" the theoretical position that "make connections between *women's caring* and *ecological politics*" (MacGregor, 2006, p. 3). Over the last 20 years, Sherilyn MacGregor has been a strong advocate for ecofeminism and the necessity of accounting for gender, inequalities and intersectionality within sustainability research. In 2009, in a paper titled "A stranger silence still: the need for feminist social research on climate change," she deplores the marginalization of gender within environmental sociology and in relation to climate change. She argues that a feminist and gender analysis is relevant to the problem of climate change in three areas: first, gender as a discursive construction is relevant to better understand the social construction of climate change and the power dynamics involved. Second, it also offer tools for better understanding institutional and individual responses of mitigation and adaptation. Third, and most relevant for our topic, feminist research can offer a more in-depth understanding of how climate changes translates in everyday life in relation to the *global feminization of poverty* (p. 130), the *gendered division of labor* (p. 131), and the *gender differences in perception of climate change-related risks* (p. 131, ital. in original). In other words, climate change is more disruptive to women's lives worldwide, as they already are poorer and more vulnerable while also bearing the responsibility of social reproduction, but research that takes them into account tends to be sidelined (MacGregor, 2009). In 2021, MacGregor's diagnosis has not changed. She notes that while some see a "materialist turn" within mainstream environmental politics scholarship which leads to taking everyday life seriously, this "turn" tends once again to ignore gender and ecofeminist scholarship. As a consequence, it fails to take into account decades of work on the everyday as political, both a space of asymmetrical power relations and a base for political action and activism. This omission is not without consequences. She writes: "Discussions of sustainable materialism celebrate a 'new domesticity' of crafting, growing and sewing, with no mention of changing the structural conditions or gendered power relations that shape how people manage to meet everyday needs in a capitalist economy" (MacGregor, 2021, p. 56).

MacGregor's critic of the place of the everyday in environmental sociology doesn't account for the considerable amount of work produced in sociology of consumption and through social practice approaches, which center on everyday life, the conditions of its (re)production, and what this implies for sustainable consumption. However, as we stated earlier, it is also a body of work which struggles to account for gender and inequalities, although this is changing. For example, Fathallah and Pyakurel (2020) question the problematic use of gender and the lack of differentiation between "gender" and "sex" within energy studies both in the Global North and the Global South. In a study of voluntary downshifting among Australian households, Lane et al. (2020) noted that the reduction in both paid working hours and consumption was most often motivated not by sustainability, but by the necessities of care giving, which was almost always accomplished by women, pleading for the necessity of taking gender and care into account in the discussions around reducing consumption. Similarly, Johnson (2020) demonstrates the importance of chore-doing for energy

systems transition and its quasi-absence from both public policy and scholarship, along with the absence of gender. She argues that it is a major blind spots which risks undermining efforts to reduce household energy consumption. In a recent article, Murphy and Parry (2021) draw on feminist scholars, such as Tronto and MacGregor, to cast light on the ways actions aimed at promoting sustainability, because they often do not question the gendered division of domestic labor, can be regressive in relation to gender equality and increase women's workload. They conceptualize care as a key site for envisioning new approaches to household sustainability that take into account gender dynamics and relationships. Finally, in a promising approach for integrating gender within social practice theory, Mechlenborg and Gram-Hanssen theorize gender as "threading through a multitude of practices" (Mechlenborg and Gram-Hanssen, 2020, p. 5) and argue that energy consumption practices and technologies are gendered, and that in energy studies, gender needs to be taken into account at every stage of the research process, as the energy system transition will be "entangled in everyday life" and gender (p. 7).

Social Practice Approaches and Change in Practices and Habits

In relation to sustainability and consumption, concerns around care and gender lead us to the issue of change, and how it happens. For changing household consumption, public policy and interventions tend to draw on individualistic approaches that are focused on behavior, and to put aside the context in which individuals and households exist (Shove, 2010). As an answer to the limits of individualism, since the 1990s, theories of social practices have been developed to conceptualize everyday life, routines, and habits as a social phenomenon. In this social ontology, practices, rather than individuals, are the unit of analysis. Following Schatzki (2001, p. 72), practices can be defined as a set of "bodily doings and sayings" which are performed through an "array of activity" (2001, p. 2), meaning they imply action and the enactment of tasks and projects. In a similar vein, Reckwitz (2002, p. 249) defines a practice as a "routinised type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge." As a consequence, to understand consumption and change, one can look at practices and what allows them to exist, as opposed to the individuals performing them. In a popular conceptualization of practices, Shove et al. (2012) suggest that they are made up of three elements, namely material, competences, and meaning, the combination of which makes the performance of a particular practice possible. As they are rooted in the body, in the material world and in the social world, practices tend to be strongly resistant to change (Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014). Practices nevertheless contain the "seeds of constant change" as people who carry them "adapt, improvise and experiment" (Warde, 2005, p. 141). By looking at how their elements combine, it becomes possible to understand the stability and change of a practice or a bundle of practices. Acting on the

interconnection of practices can provoke change across a bundle of practices (Jensen et al., 2018). For instance, participative approaches to energy consumption have demonstrated that it is possible to voluntarily re-craft practices by acting on their constituting elements, such as social norms or skills (Sahakian et al., 2021). However, changing practices involves work which, in the household arena, risks falling disproportionately on women's shoulders (Godin et al., 2020; Johnson, 2020). This concern, and the impact it can have on successfully implementing more sustainable consumption practices and lifestyles, is at the core of this paper.

METHODOLOGY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE DATA

Data Collection and Analysis

To better understand the role of gender and care in the academic literature on sustainable consumption and pave the way to a better conceptual integration, we engaged in a critical, or integrative, review of the literature on sustainable household consumption (Snyder, 2019), based on a corpus of paper built between March 2020 and April 2021, with additions made in September 2021. To identify papers relevant to this review, we relied on our prior knowledge of the literature, conducted a search on Google Scholar, and identified more relevant papers by examining the reference lists of the journal articles already included in the analysis. We also collected suggestions of relevant papers through a post in the newsletter of a professional network of researchers and activists on sustainable consumption, along with a call launched on social media. To be included in the analysis, papers had to fulfill two criteria. First, they had to center around sustainable consumption practices, as defined by Schatzki (2001, 2002). Second, they had to relate to the phases of "taking care of" or "care giving" as defined by Fisher and Tronto (1991), whether the practices were conceptualized in these terms or not.

In total, we examined around 130 papers and book chapters, and retained 75 for analysis (see **Annex 1** for the list of papers and their main objects). The papers we analyzed were published between 1998 and 2021. For each paper, we filled an analytical form containing eight categories. The first five categories were descriptive and included: (1) consumption domains, such as food, energy, or transportation; (2) main object of the paper, for example "gender in energy studies" or "arrival of a new child and consumption"; (3) care practices, such as cleaning, feeding the family, or caring for the family or the community in general; (4) theoretical approach and main concepts; and (5) methods. The last three categories were analytical and addressed (6) the role of care in the argument, looking at whether care is addressed directly or not, how care intersects with consumption, or what the object of care is; (7) the role of gender in the argument, and how it intersects with care and sustainability; and finally (8) recommendations for public policy or change discussed in the papers. Once all forms were completed, we performed a content analysis underlining the factors at play in the performance of care as it relates to consumption and change, refining the code as the analysis was progressing and going back to the original paper

when necessary. The section “Caring for” and “Care Giving” in the Literature on Sustainable Consumption presents the results of this content analysis.

Description of the Corpus

The bulk of our corpus consists of empirical papers that present the results of research conducted in Europe, Canada, Australia and the United States. Adding to this are eight theoretical papers, and two literature reviews from European scholars. The limited geographical scope of our corpus is a reflection of the status of the literature on household sustainable consumption, which tends to remain scarce outside of the Western world while either adopting an individualistic framework or focusing on the socio-technical dimension of the sustainability transition (for the example of China, see Liu et al., 2016). This means that the results of the present paper remain culturally situated and might not reflect the way sustainable consumption and care interact outside Western societies, in which consumption plays a central role that is not necessarily replicated elsewhere. This might also contribute to hiding power relationships, vulnerabilities and inequalities that arise from the essential role of care for sustainable consumption, which would appear with a different formulation of the problem.

Regarding methods, five papers relied exclusively on quantitative data, mostly time-use surveys, while the rest of the empirical paper employed either qualitative or mixed methods. Although we conducted our research in both English and French, the papers selected and reviewed were exclusively written in English. The journals most often represented in the review are *Energy Research and Social Science* and *Geoforum*, with ten and five publications, respectively. Based on the journals’ affiliations to a certain discipline, we determined that the disciplines most often represented were geography (16), energy studies (14), sociology (11), and consumption and consumer culture (8). However, we can expect sociology, geography and other social sciences such as anthropology to be “hidden” in journals related to food studies, energy studies, or transport, for example. Twenty-nine papers studied sustainable consumption based on social practice approaches. This is a reflection of both the criteria for selecting papers, which favored papers that draw on a social practice approach given its focus on non-conspicuous consumption, and of its prevalence in research on the social dimension of sustainable consumption. The other papers mobilized various academic fields and theoretical approaches such as gender studies, time-use research, sociology of everyday life, relational sociology, moral philosophy and ethics, consumer culture theory, actor-network theory, behavioral change, and political ecology. Twenty-three papers discuss energy consumption, covering practices such as heating and cooling, laundry, cleaning up, communication and entertainment, and meal preparation. Twenty-one papers discuss food consumption, including provisioning, cooking, waste management and meal planning. Twenty-five papers deal with consumption in general—every day and ethical consumption and consumer culture—, four with mobility, and two with the consumption of space. The main care practices discussed in the corpus pertain to childcare and care for the family more broadly (feeding children and attending to their needs, doing the laundry, ensuring the

comfort of the family). In these two areas as well as in relation with food, there was often a tension between the care for the self, in relation to one’s health and security, and care for a distant other, the community, or the environment.

Finally, a handful of papers included in the corpus drew directly on feminist ethics of care. For example, Marovelli (2019) turns to Tronto’s fifth phase of care, “caring with,” to study food sharing practices, showing that food sharing can be a way to alleviate isolation, express vulnerabilities and build communities. Jarosz (2011), building on feminist ethics of care and Foucault’s ethics of self-care, argued that community sustained agriculture is experienced as a way to take care of others while taking care of oneself. Lane et al. (2020) drew on feminist ethics of care to explore the relation between care giving, consumption and downshifting, showing that care giving, rather than sustainability, is the motivation for reducing working hours, income, and consumption. Morgan (2010) employed Tronto’s ethic of care to discuss choices made by consumer citizens, stating that ethical and green consumption can be conceptualized as a way of “caring for distant strangers.” Meah and Jackson (2017), using Fisher and Tronto’s phases of care, demonstrated that “convenience food,” although often characterized as unsustainable and unhealthy, can be used as an expression of care for one’s family, because it enables mothers to combine childcare with cooking. Finally, Mincyté et al. (2020) considered self-provisioning agricultural work as a “more-than-human” care ethics which, while serving as a pathway toward more sustainable future, also reproduce gender inequalities. All these papers highlight the relational character of care, which will appear in the next section as the defining element for thinking about consumption, care, and sustainability in relation to change.

“CARING FOR” AND “CARE GIVING” IN THE LITERATURE ON SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

In this section, we analyse how care work is addressed in relation to sustainable consumption and change in the literature. We start by looking at how the mundane realities of caring for a child, social norms, and gender inequalities interact in regard to sustainable consumption in the context of mothering. We argue that mothering best exemplifies how the realities of everyday life and the constraints of care work tend to hinder the transition to more sustainable lifestyles at the household level. Following this, we look at the different elements impacting the relation between sustainable consumption practices and care work, and how they often contribute to impeding change.

Mothering as a Blueprint for Understanding Sustainable Consumption and Care

Tronto (1993, p. 109) points out that in Western cultures, mothering is seen as the “paradigmatic act of caring,” which is clearly reflected in the literature on household sustainable consumption. Some papers within our corpus directly address the question of mothering whether or not the discussions are linked to gender dynamics. Work completed by Burningham and Venn

(2017) on early motherhood, Cairns et al. (2013) on the “organic child,” and Parker and Morrow (2017) on urban homesteading and intensive mothering, all highlight the interrelations between ideals of good mothering, the time and material constraints of caring for a child, and the unequal distribution of labor within the household. While the arrival of a child might lead to increased concern for the environment and its protection, the implementation of sustainable or ethical consumption practices such as organic or local food consumption, avoiding taking the car, living at a lower temperature or reducing waste, happens only if a synergy is built between several elements: representations of the child well-being or of “good mothering” to which the practices may be associated; a balance between family time and the time required for the good performance of these practices, and the availability of adequate financial resources (Burningham and Venn, 2017). This combination can be more difficult to achieve while caring for an infant, and Jamieson (2016) suggests that the arrival of a first child can lead to giving up sustainable consumption practices, especially if they become incompatible with family life. Therefore, papers that focus on mothering confront head on what perspires in the literature on household sustainable consumption more generally, namely that the actual implementation of sustainable consumption practices happens only when the constraints and concerns of family life allow it, and that family life and relationships within the household often come in the way of implementing more sustainable consumption practices.

Shedding light on mothering in relation to care and sustainable consumption also reveals the entanglement of different areas or objects of care, and how they get prioritized. Knibb and Taylor (2017) show how, in Western societies, green consumption can be enmeshed with parental identity and viewed as a moral obligation. Through green consumption, mothers in particular can seek to promote the well-being of their children while feeling they are doing their part for the environment. Ethical consumption can also be a tool for new mothers who need to build their post-natal identity (Carey et al., 2008). However, as “green motherhood” is motivated by the well-being and the needs of children, if the “green” alternatives are not compatible with what is perceived as being good care giving, it will be set aside. Indeed, caring for a child and its well-being often means putting health first, and the environment or community second, while caring for the environment is often embedded in the act of caring for a child and the family well-being. Caring for a distant stranger through individual commodity choice and ethical consumption can also merge itself with caring for the self or the family. This is well-illustrated by Hawkins (2012) who studied “cause-related marketing” campaigns, that use environmentalism to promote shampoo while promising to the women who buy a specific sort of shampoo that their purchase will support mothers’ access to clean water in the Global South. In doing so, she shows how ethical consumption is gendered, women being most often targeted by such strategies, and how such campaigns serve to essentialize motherhood, framing it, in this case, as “moms helping moms.”

In line with Tronto’s argument that good care depends on accessing resources, looking at the everyday conditions for

adopting sustainable consumption practices while conforming to social norms related to gender and mothering also means thinking about inequalities and their expression. Cairns et al. (2013, p. 111) discuss this in the context of raising the ideal “organic child,” which “requires significant investments of economic and cultural capital. The organic child ideal works ideologically to reinforce gendered notions of care-work, and establishes a standard for good mothering that is widely recognized, but not universally attainable.” As they demonstrate, successfully performing an unrealistic representation of good mothering while caring for the environment is not something that is accessible to everyone equally, nor is the social recognition attached to high standards of care in the different consumption domains. Moreover, failing to conform to social norms can quickly lead to feelings of shame and guilt, especially in Western societies where successful femininity can be linked to achieving those ambitious standards of care. In short, the literature on mothering brings together social norms, access to sufficient resources, the gendered distribution of work within the household, and ideals of motherhood and femininity. In doing so, it reveals how the dynamics that bind these elements together often become an obstacle to the establishment of more sustainable lifestyles. This literature also provides a blueprint for understanding how sustainable consumption and care interact in the household.

Sustainable Consumption Practices as Care Work and the Implications for Change

In the following pages, we analyse the main household consumption practices represented in the literature on sustainable consumption as part of activities of “caring for” and “care giving.” The goal is to better understand how change happens at the household level and gain insight for the transition toward more sustainable forms of consumption. We will show how the necessity of satisfying everyone’s needs, the constraints of time and the rhythms of daily life, social norms, emotions, and gender inequalities within the home all tend to hinder the adoption of more sustainable consumption practices and habits, which invites us to rethink the role of the household as a site for change.

Conflicting Needs and Desires Within the Household

Care and consumption are both at the heart of family life. In their day-to-day activities, carers—most often mothers—juggle with household members’ varying needs, demands and desires. This is especially visible in relation to food and cooking, where taking into account everybody’s taste and preferences is seen as an expression of love and a way of being a good mother (Gojard and Véron, 2018). However, because of the complexity and limits of composing with a wide variety of wants and needs, it can lead to food waste (Evans, 2012). In relation to food but also energy consumption, carers often prioritize their health and the health of family members over the health of the planet (Gojard and Véron, 2018). Prioritizing human health can play both for and against more sustainable consumption practices. Indeed, caring for the health of family members can lead to more organic or local food consumption, but it can also perpetuate the

practices of meat consumption or keeping a warmer home. In this vein, Heath et al. (2016) show how family members can oppose the adoption of more sustainable practices, such as refraining from eating meat, in relation to what they value as “good” or “bad” for the development of the children. Similarly, Carey et al. (2008) note how, as a way to maintain good relationships between household members, a person can make a compromise regarding consumption practices or realign her habits with what is commonly sanctioned. As a consequence, in relation to establishing new, more sustainable consumption practices, the more conservative household members tend to have the upper hand, which contributes to maintaining the status quo.

Competing Rhythms and Issues Related to Time

Taking every household member's needs into account also means carers need to adapt to different rhythms, especially in relation to children, and including guests. Discussing energy consumption, Hargreaves and Middlemiss (2020) write: “families with children can face profound difficulties in shifting their energy use in demand response intervention due to the immediate and immovable demands of infants, or the fixed schedules imposed by school timetables.” In this context, “demand flexibility,” which centers around the notion of time, relies on the doing of chores and care work, as argued by Johnson (2020). Johnson coined the expression “Flexibility Woman” to highlight the way energy systems capitalize on undervalued domestic labor. She presents the Flexibility Woman as the feminine pendant of the “Resource Man,” a caricatural representation of the well-informed, competent, technology-oriented energy consumer for which smart energy systems tend to be designed, painted by Strengers (2014). In her study of smart meters and time use tariffs in the UK, Johnson shows how, contrary to the Resource Man, the Flexibility Woman does exist. To access cheaper energy, she has “knowledge about her family's consumption habits, the loads in home and the schedules of life that shaped her household's electricity demand profile” (Johnson, 2020, p. 6). Through the lens of chore-doing, the adoption of more sustainable consumption practices within the household—materialized here through energy consumption off peak hours—appears to be contingent on the practices' compatibility with the needs, preferences or expectations of the household members, including their respective schedules, rhythms and routines, and the availability of someone for managing this variety of needs.

In Western societies, the rhythms of everyday life, and the time constraints that impact the possibility of adopting sustainable consumption practices, are closely linked to the world of work, the work-life balance, and the notions of “time squeeze” and “time prosperity.” They are also tied to the “committed time,” which directly relates to the necessities of care work (Smetschka et al., 2019). Wiedenhofer et al. (2018, p. 7) argue that “[a]rrangements on working hours and income strongly structure everyday living; most other activities are also organized around them. Income and available time also influence which goods and services are required to conduct everyday life.” Most often, these activities seem to lead to a “time squeeze” which can perpetuate less sustainable practices, such as taking the car instead of cycling to work, taking the plane instead of the train,

buying goods instead of sharing, or turning to convenience food to have more time for the family (Meah and Jackson, 2017). Lacking time or being rushed also seems to directly influence the transformation of routines and habits and the adoption of new practices. Schoolman (2016) shows how “rushed shoppers” have more difficulty forming new buying routines in relation to ethical consumption, as it necessitates taking time in the supermarket to study products and look for alternatives. In other words, adopting new practices takes time, which is not available to everyone equally.

Reducing work hours to escape the time squeeze has been discussed as a way of lowering consumption. However, at the household and individual levels, empirical work suggests that it is no silver bullet, especially if it is not done with sustainability and reducing consumption in mind. In studies conducted in Australia by Lindsay et al. (2020) and Lane et al. (2020), voluntary downshifting was most often undertaken as an answer to overwhelming caring responsibilities, usually for children or aging parents. In general, it was women reducing their work hours or giving up paid work entirely, which has implications for gender equality. Similarly, in a research project on a co-housing project oriented toward reducing consumption and sustainability through collective installations and sharing resources, Leitner and Littig (2018) observed that going from a lifestyle centered around the household to a lifestyle organized around the community did not have a significant impact on CO₂ emissions, on time devoted to care practices, or the distribution of care work between genders. They explain these results by the difficulty of coordinating former and new practices, the time, motivation and work necessary for creating new routines and habits, and the rigidity of collective practices (e.g., meal time) in terms of schedule, which might come in conflict with paid work or care for children. In short, downshifting or reducing consumption relies on the availability of various resources with time being key, and the same goes for care giving.

Obstacles Linked to Social Norms and Gender Relations

While the complexities of fulfilling everyone's needs and the constraints of time have a rather tangible impact on the transformation of consumption practices, at the more symbolic level, social norms and standards enforce specific ways of doing in relation to “caring for,” “care giving” and consumption. Social norms are rules that dictate how one should or ought to be in a society and they lead to sanctions when they are broken, such as shaming or being cast aside (Durkheim, 1893, 1894). They are thus communicated and enforced through emotions and affects, as we will discuss below. Regarding standards, they are the personal interpretation of a social norm and its application. Strong social norms exist in relation to health, cleanliness, bodily odors, or comfort for example, which can have a direct impact on energy consumption through activities such as doing the laundry, showering, and heating. Social relations tend to uphold social norms and often preclude change. For example, Sahakian (2018) shows how relations within affluent circles in Geneva create a social lock-in effect where social pressure, as well as the need for acceptance and for “keeping up with trends,” often leads to

the enforcement of strict norms in regards to cleanliness or the necessity of getting new, bigger appliances. Here, social norms and their translation into standards contribute to keeping energy consumption at high levels. In the context of unobtrusive and household consumption, standards define the specific, personal interpretation of “comfort, cleanliness and convenience” (Shove, 2003). For example, they determine what is “enough” in relation to doing the laundry, in terms of frequency of washing or water temperature, while the norm will relate to the smelling or appearance, which is what can be perceived by others. Standards can vary from household to household, but also between household members, which might lead to negotiations. The type of negotiation, and what is up for discussion, depends on the relation between household members. For example, in one research project in Europe, teenagers appeared to have much stricter cleanliness standards than adults in relation to laundry, presumably because of what they perceived the expectations of their peers to be (Godin et al., 2020), and this had an impact on the parent’s actual cleaning practices. While negotiations surrounding laundry might not be a common occurrence among roommates, the topic of room temperature, for example, might be up for discussion in such a setting. Standards related to comfort can differ based on age or what has been learned during childhood (Hansen and Jacobsen, 2020). In relation to cleanliness, they can be part of a mechanism of social comparison or identity formation, which in turn has an impact on daily energy consumption (Shove and Warde, 1998). In their discussion of the links between food, health and sustainability, Plessz et al. (2016) argue that standards relating to food tend to change at “life-course turning points” such as moving or having a first child, which often leads to the integration of new prescriptions into the diet. Prescriptions play a part in defining what an appropriate meal is, and the importance they are given depends on who does the food provisioning and cooking, and who sits at the table, as food is a way of building, maintaining and expressing relationships (Godin and Sahakian, 2018).

Emotions and affects are the means through which social norms are learned and enforced. They are also gendered and inherent to care. As such, they can have both a negative and a positive impact on the adoption of more sustainable consumption practices and habits. For example, not conforming to social norms about what a proper meal is—including when these norms run counter to sustainable practices—can lead to feelings of culpability and stress. In fact, the “prospect of social sanction” when contravening to social norms seems to be a factor that precludes the adoption of sustainable practices. For instance, in relation to meat, Mylan (2018) writes: “In the case of consumers taking action on sustainable consumption of meat, the study demonstrates that this was frequently constrained by the prospect of social sanctions, in the form of the disappointment of others, unsatisfying participation in social occasions, or anticipation of wasted time and effort, which effectively curbed the enactment of meat reduction.” Wondering why food practices are not more sustainable in France, Dubuisson-Quellier and Gojard (2016) argue that the gratification and satisfaction that comes with a “traditional meal” appears to be greater than the one that comes with having more sustainable practices. In both

these cases, failing to conform to social norms, or having the impression to fail—for example in relation to cleanliness or cooking healthy food—leads directly to negative affects. On the other hand, lowering standards—which in many cases leads to reducing consumption—can contribute to calming anxieties and diminishing the “mental load” (Godin et al., 2020). Similarly, the work put into conforming to social norms or seeking to adopt sustainable consumption practices can also feel heavy and contribute to frustration and anxiety. In sum, emotions and affects can be a barrier to the adoption of more sustainable practices, but they can also support transformations in routines and habits, when change means being relieved from stress and experiencing more positive feelings.

Finally, the fact that women tend to be socialized to work for the well-being of their kin as well as more abstract “future generations” influences their involvement with “green” and sustainable consumption. Drawing on MacGregor feminist critic of ecological citizenship, Elliott (2013) argues that although green consumption can be used as a symbol for women to express themselves about their role as caregivers and mothers, targeting women through green marketing reaffirms the gendered division on labor. This is important because the unequal division of domestic labor, which is tied to strong gender norms, contributes to the time squeeze that comes in the way of achieving more sustainable consumption practices. Schoolman (2016), in his study of ethical consumption in supermarkets, shows how the devaluation of care work as a social phenomenon is an obstacle to change in itself. He writes: “In often quite self-aware discussions, participants connected their ‘rushed’ orientation toward shopping to the idea that taking time to do things like read labels and ponder differences between products—essential steps to becoming an ethical consumer—is basically a feminine quality, and not appropriate for someone with more serious things to do” (2016, p. 629). Similarly, in their study on time use and the division of domestic labor in “sustainable households,” Organo et al. (2013) show that sustainable consumption practices tend to follow traditional division of household labor—women cook and clean, while men are involved in activities requiring longer blocks of time, such as gardening or activities related to transport. In this context, women’s work is less visible, as it mostly relates to routines, habits and everyday life, but they remain the ones who instigate change and carry most of the weight related to adopting new practices and habits. Grønhøj and Ølander (2007) made a similar observation and demonstrate how pro-environmental behavior tends to follow a traditional division of labor, women adopting environmentally-friendly habits inside the home and men outside the home. As gender roles and relationships of care within households tend to be especially resistant to change (Godin et al., 2020), and given that expectations surrounding care structure energy demand (Hargreaves and Middlemiss, 2020), gender norms and unequal distribution of labor within the home can curb the transformation of consumption practices toward more sustainability. At the same time, challenging gender roles offers interesting possibilities for intervention and could open the door to a renegotiation of standards, expectations, and priorities, which can lead to lower energy consumption and higher well-being (Sahakian and Bertho, 2018).

SOCIAL INEQUALITIES AS A BARRIER TO SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLES

When we started this critical literature review, we set out to find the ways through which “taking care of” and “care giving” in the home can be a vehicle for sustainable consumption practices. What we found is the opposite. Rather than an opportunity for change, care work has proven to be a significant obstacle, as it is linked to the main activities that upholds routines and habits while mobilizing the very resources that are needed to transform them. The “time squeeze”—which is tied to the world of work and feeds on the unequal distribution of household labor—is a particularly important issue. Applying the conceptualization developed by Tronto (1993) to the study of sustainable consumption highlights the fact that the current organization of our societies does not allow “good care” to happen. “Good care,” indeed, would involve access to the necessary resources—including time, money, and social support—to work for the well-being of humans, non-humans and the planet, all of which is rendered difficult by the organization of everyday lives in the Western world.

How can we address these issues as a society if we are to truly establish sustainable lifestyles? Based on our findings, we want to put forward four suggestions. First, *reducing care work* could free resources to experiment with change. One main way of doing this would be to challenge social norms and to lower standards. This has been tried elsewhere in relation to heating and laundry, with a certain level of success (Jack, 2013; Sahakian et al., 2021). Key to reducing consumption was to create awareness of social norms and collective conventions, and to trigger reflexivity that would lead people to critically look at their own practices and habits. A second way would be to *redistribute* care work within the home, which could relieve the household members who accomplish the bulk of it while potentially promoting the engagement of others in care work. This could increase resources dedicated to care and support change toward more sustainable consumption practices, while challenging gender inequalities and the division of domestic labor. In Western countries, there has been a clear movement toward a more equal division of housework in the second half of the 20th century – even though it seems to have slowed down after 2000 (Altintas and Sullivan, 2016). However, there are some worries regarding the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on this issue, for women but also families (Power, 2020). It is also notoriously difficult to achieve change in relation to gender roles, as women’s care work is deeply embedded in routines and habits, but also the functioning of our economies. Toward this end, Elson (2017) points to the need to “recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work” as a strategy to close the gender gap, in a way that mirrors the argument we are making here, and which underlines the interdependencies of challenging gender inequalities and supporting more sustainable consumption practices in the home.

Rethinking the world of work is a third path toward more sustainable consumption practices and lifestyles. In a recent study, Mallinson and Cheng (2021) replicated for the years 2014–2017 a research by Fitzgerald et al. (2018) that demonstrated

a positive association between working hours and greenhouse gases emissions across the United States between 2007 and 2013. Following their analysis, Mallison and Cheng came to similar results, but noted that this association seemed to have become stronger over time, providing a convincing argument for reducing working hours as an answer to climate change. This argument ties in with scholarship advocating for degrowth as laid out by authors such as Jackson (2011) or Kallis (2019); Kallis et al., 2020). In their book *The Case for Degrowth*, Kallis et al. (2020) argue that the path toward a sustainable economy goes through a reduction of working hours as a way of “slowing down,” reducing emissions, and enhancing well-being. Elsewhere, Kallis (2019, p. 2) argued that care can “become the hallmark of an economy based on reproduction, rather than expansion.” Building a caring economy—one that recognizes the value of care and centers around care work and categories of employment such as health care, education, community building or disability care—could offer a pathway for a transition to more sustainable lifestyles. The recovery that will follow the Covid-19 pandemic will open possibilities for moving in this direction (Cohen, 2020; De Henau and Himmelweit, 2021). Investing in an economy that makes visible and recognizes the value of care could also have an impact on some of the roots of gender, socioeconomic and racial inequalities, as we will discuss below. Our final proposition is to *actively promote the development of an ethos of care* that covers humans, other beings, the material world and the planet. This must happen through the active involvement of all sectors of society, especially politics and the State, mainstream and alternative media, and schools. This would mean putting our interdependencies with others and the material world at the core of our worldview, to represent ourselves as embedded into the living world, and to make care the foundation of our political organization.

This leads us to underlining an important gap in the scholarship on sustainable consumption practices and social practice approaches, which has to do with the relative absence of social inequalities and vulnerabilities in relation to race, income, education, or health in this literature. As Tronto (1993) puts forward, historically, care has been devalued and trapped in dynamics of oppression. It is often accomplished by people coming from the more marginalized segments of the population who are more vulnerable because of gender, race, but also social class and income, such as women, LGBTQ+ people or people of color. While it can be argued that middle-class households, because of their numerical importance, are key to mainstreaming more sustainable consumption practices, they do rely on the hidden and devalued work of marginalized populations to maintain their lifestyles and their level of consumption. Paid care work within and outside the home, such as the one accomplished by *au-pair* workers and domestic cleaners, teachers and daycares workers, hospital or long-term care facilities staff, and the long list of “essential workers” whose importance has been highlighted by the Covid-19 epidemic, is a condition to maintain the production and consumption system as it is now. How they are treated now, in relation to wages or work conditions among other elements, is often the very opposite of what an ethos of care

means. Including them in our view of sustainable consumption and lifestyles means pushing the reflexion from “care giving” to “caring with,” embedding our accounts of household consumption in the production system, and accounting for the spaces where invisibilized, devalued care and reproductive work happens, all of which is crucial to creating truly sustainable lifestyles.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/**Supplementary Material**, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

LG contributed to defining the conceptual framework and the methodology, as well as data analysis and interpretation. JL conducted the data collection and most of the analysis while providing input for the conceptual framework and interpretation. Both authors contributed

to the article and approved the submitted version.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frsus.2021.725753/full#supplementary-material>

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