

CULINARY CANVAS: EXPLORING INTERSECTIONALITY AND CRISES THROUGH CAPE TOWN'S FEMINIST FLAVORS

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Opinion Briefs is a thought-provoking series that expands on the findings of the Urban Food Future's scoping report, *Pathways to Transform Urban Food Systems* (Paganini & Weigelt, 2023). Authored by the team and partners of Urban Food Futures, this collection serves as a stepping stone to enrich and deepen our work. With a collective vision to implement the pathways outlined in the scoping report, the series presents fresh insights, in-depth analysis, and innovative perspectives. These thoughtfully crafted briefs aim to challenge conventional notions and explore new horizons in the realm of urban food systems transformation to ignite meaningful discussions and catalyse tangible actions.

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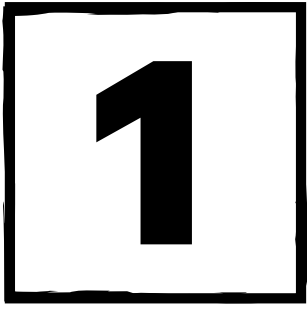
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

"Polycrisis Pantry" delves into the intricate interplay between global crises and local adversities, spotlighting their profound impact on individuals and communities. The analysis focuses on the concept of polycrises, where multiple crises intersect, heightening vulnerabilities and instabilities. The study adopts a gendered perspective, particularly in how these crises uniquely affect women, notably in urban and low-income contexts. The paper underscores the pivotal role of social capital and networks, especially for women, during times of upheaval.

The research delves into four intertwined crises: the isolation induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, escalating food prices, energy shortages, and gender-based violence. It examines the disproportionate toll each crisis takes on women's roles, lives, and overall well-being. The authors underline the essential function of community kitchens in offering sustenance and solidarity, evolving into secure havens for women navigating adversities. The study employs innovative methods by utilizing culinary metaphors and art-infused approaches to convey the intricate nature of these crises. Through this approach, it underscores the value of feminist viewpoints in comprehending

and tackling the intricate tapestry of these challenges. The text poses probing questions, urging readers to ponder the ramifications of dwindling social capital, the interrelationship between global and local predicaments, and the necessity for nuanced insights in addressing and mitigating crises. In conclusion, „Polycrisis Pantry“ underscores the imperative to acknowledge and address the dynamic interplay between global crises and local hardships, with a focused lens on women's ordeals. It accentuates the potency of feminist research methodologies and spotlights the urgency of fostering resilience while dismantling systemic disparities.



INTRODUCTION - AMUSE BOUCHE

GLOBAL CRISES LOOM LARGE,
WIELDING THE POWER TO SHAPE
THE DESTINY OF NATIONS AND
THE COURSE OF HUMANITY.

In the intricate tapestry of our world, global crises loom large, wielding the power to shape the destiny of nations and the course of humanity. These monumental challenges, be they environmental, economic, or social, demand our collective attention and action, for their consequences resonate far beyond borders. However, within the heart of every community, amidst the ebb and flow of daily life, lies a quieter yet equally profound struggle – one that is etched by the intricacies of local realities, economic hardships, and the complex web of socio-cultural structures and politics. Households and individuals bear the weight of their own crises, navigating the currents of change while shaping their unique paths through the tribulations of existence. In this interplay between global crises and local hardships, the world's future is determined not only by grand, global forces, but also by the sum of individual lived-experiences and

traumas, making it crucial to recognise and address the challenges faced at every level of society.

This interplay is unfolding in the wake of multifaceted global polycrises; that is, situations characterised by the convergence or simultaneous occurrence of multiple crises. These crises increase fragility and lead to political instability, involuntary migration, unrest, violence, and hunger (WEF, 2023). According to the analysis of the World Economic Forum's Global Risk Report, two drivers underpin a polycrisis: the speed of reaction to climate change and geoeconomic confrontation, creating marked impact on our global ability to match the supply and demand of natural resources. Polycrises are complex and interconnected and often exacerbate and amplify the effects of each crisis that makes up the polycrisis. Beyond the drivers outlined by WEF, how do polycrises affect women?

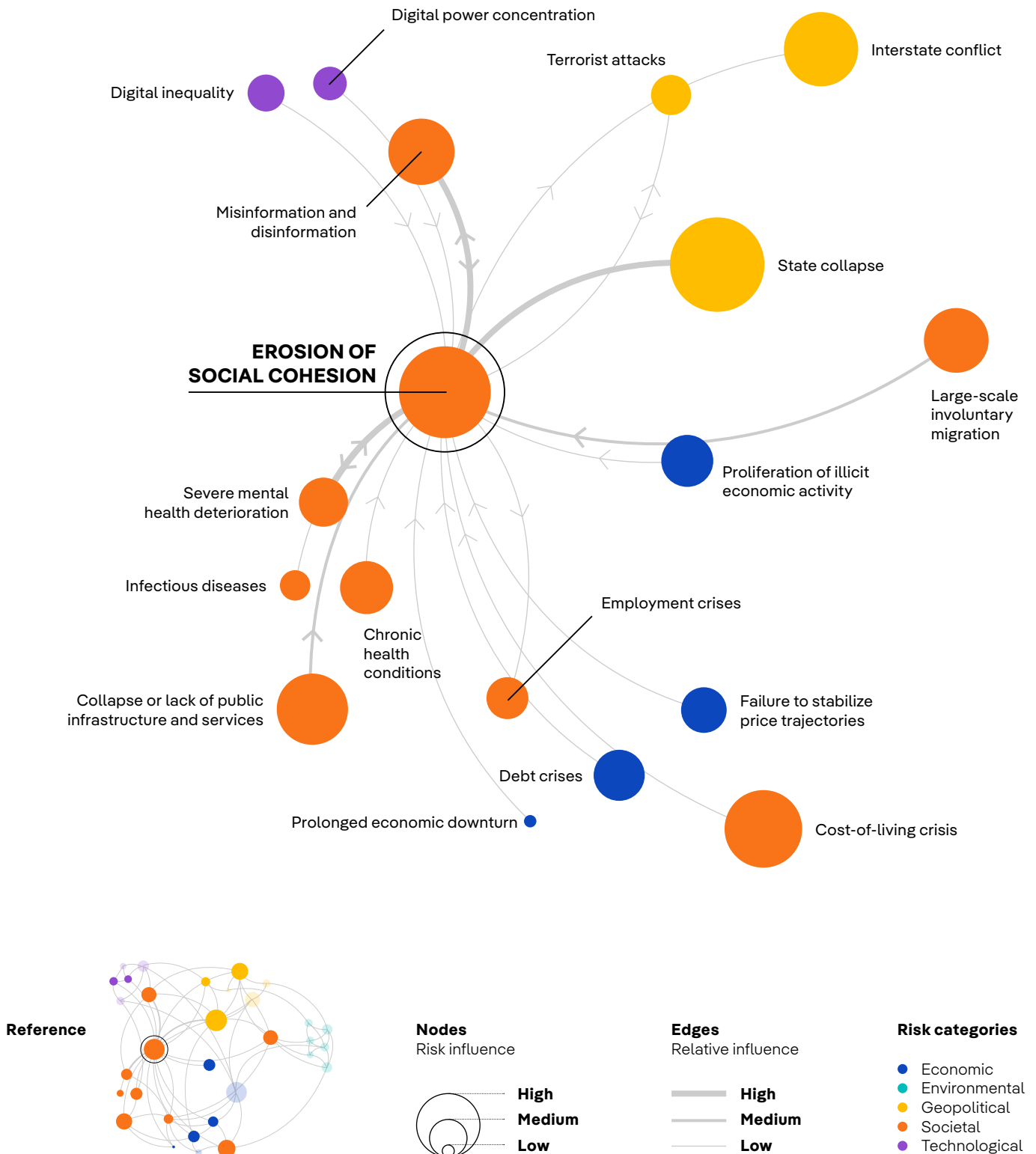
Crises particularly impact women in urban areas and low-income settlements due to a combination of social, economic, and structural factors such as marginalised housing, lack of safe community spaces, and high rates of violence against women (UN Women, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). Whilst governments and change makers attempt to shift the course of crises and plan short-term interventions, it is women who are left to cope with the here and now of caring for their families and communities as crises mount around them. Women expend incalculable amounts of energy and emotion while constantly responding to crises. During these times, the burden of caregiving and household management intensifies as women shift into new roles (sometimes taking on income generation, community support, and additional care work) while their usual household roles become more arduous as access to social, financial, and environmental capital melt away and eat into their limited time and resources.

Women living in marginalised environments rely and thrive on social capital and even more so during polycrisis. Social capital refers to the networks of relationships, trust, reciprocity, and cooperation that exist within a community or society, it can exist at various levels, from personal relationships to larger community networks and even extend to societal

institutions (Lin, 2001). Recent work from Groenmeyer (2021) describes the increased labour burden placed upon women, especially Indigenous women and women of colour at the Cape during COVID-19, and how they coped by relying on each other as threadbare formal support systems broke away or never existed at all. These connections are vital to the effective functioning of societies and are often entirely female: Torche and Valenzuela (2011) assert that it is the very strength, diversity, and breadth of women's connections that build the overall social capital of a person or community. Silvia Federici's analysis (2018) centres around the significance of women's labour in social and care work in maintaining commons and community well-being despite being historically undervalued or invisible within capitalist systems. She maintains that creating supportive networks and spaces for women to share knowledge, resources, and experiences builds social cohesion and capital while allowing women to challenge social norms, advocate for their rights, and collectively address common issues such as coping during times of crises. Indeed, the erosion of social capital worldwide is noted by WEF (2023) to lead to declining social stability, individual and collective well-being, and economic productivity and is so problematic that they ranked it as the fifth-most severe perceived global risk.

CRISES PARTICULARLY IMPACT WOMEN IN URBAN AREAS AND LOW-INCOME SETTLEMENTS DUE TO A COMBINATION OF SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND STRUCTURAL FACTORS.

Figure 1. Erosion of social capital/cohesion is ranked as the fifth-most severe perceived risk (WEF, p.23)



We share WEF's concern that the erosion of social capital impacts communities' resilience, but note that their diagramme lacks the nuances of a gendered perspective. We argue that preserving and strengthening social capital via female networks amidst multiple concurrent crises is critical as we continuously learn from our work in Cape Town, South Africa.

RECIPES FOR RESILIENCE: HOW CAPETONIAN WOMEN NOURISH SOCIAL CAPITAL IN TIMES OF CRISIS

In the midst of a multitude of crises, women in Cape Town face a unique set of challenges. From COVID-19's impact on the informal economy to rising food prices; an arduous energy crisis; tenacious gender-based violence; and structural, deeply-rooted, embodied racism, women bear the brunt of ceaseless waves of crises. The authors of this paper have been working with women in Cape Town's high-density, low-income, peri-urban Cape Flats to understand and learn from their coping mechanisms, volunteer efforts, community kitchen and social protection groups, and their provision of much-needed mutual emotional support. Since 2020, we have learned alongside twenty representatives from a network of community kitchens where hundreds of women cook and serve up to 1,000 meals a day to community members, often from their own homes, while creating spaces to foster solidarity and collective care and challenging the individualistic and isolating nature of capitalist systems. Their kitchens provide an opportunity for communities to support each other, build social capital, and collectively address the challenges they face (Battersby et al., 2022).

During COVID-19, the community kitchens we work with championed a spirit of change when bringing communities together to talk about what "building-back-better" means and what societal transformations they can achieve in response to the crisis (Paganini et al., 2021). Now, three years later, the social capital they relied upon during the COVID-19 crisis is saturated, their fragile coping mechanisms have reached their limits, and the weight of successive waves of additional crises coarsen their stressors. Struggling on society's economic fringes, they battle soaring food prices, daily sacrifices, relentless hours without power, and the looming specter of escalating violence—especially gender-based—which fuels perpetual anxiety.

Yet, they find strength to ask how they can understand that perfect storm differently: What are the intersecting factors contributing to polycrises and how could a feminist lens enhance our understanding of their multifaceted nature?

A smorgasbord of crises: A culinary arts-based approach to unpacking polycrises

Answers to these questions are being unearthed as the Urban Food Futures programme journeys toward understanding crises and coping through an intersectional research approach that complements traditional mixed-method approaches with a range of art methodologies: poetry, storytelling, and photography. Art has long been a powerful tool for feminist expression and activism. In our research approach, art allows for the exploration and amplification of marginalised voices by providing a platform for stories, experiences, and perspectives and

challenging existing power structures and societal norms that perpetuate gender inequalities, disrupting dominant narratives, offering alternative viewpoints, questioning the status quo, and suggesting social change.

The Polycrisis Pantry

In this Opinion Brief, we reflect upon our research pathway “Coping with crises” through our community kitchen network’s Polycrisis Pantry which was founded and hosted by food justice worker, Zayaan Khan, with local Capetonian chef, Maria va Zyl, and farmer-artist, Maya Marshak. Recently, the Polycrisis Pantry engaged restaurant-goers in an exploration of interrelated and compounding crises through an artfully prepared meal laced with satire as a part of the 2023 Food Dialogue¹ series of events. Highlighting metaphorical dishes such as “oysters à la microplastique” and vegetables served with a pharmaceutical tablet of seasoning, the seated meal took place on a site of reclaimed foreshore land, originally part of a delicate coastal

ecotone buried with stone, disrupting the ecology of the area. Using the plate as a canvas, the Polycrisis Pantry asked an audience to sit in discomfort as they showcased the inequity of polycrisis; humanised the impact of crises by connecting foods with families, communities, and food consumption patterns; and encouraged empathy for the lived realities of grief and trauma experienced by those coping with crises.

The photographs used in this text show curated dishes which serve as metaphors to our research work as we dish up an intersectional lens on crises, inspired by the emotional and physical workload of women from Cape Town’s community kitchens. In the last three years, four crises stood out in Cape Town: COVID-19, rising food prices, electricity shortages, and gender-based violence.

The four-course meal presented here presents these crises through a gendered perspective that sheds light on how forms of oppression intersect and manifest in individual, communal, and global food system challenges.

¹ The Food Dialogues is hosted by the South African Urban Food and Farming Trust. Food Dialogues is an annual programme of talks and events in Cape Town that focus on the local food system with a wide range of speakers involved in shaping the food system.



● **Figure 1** The meal is served. Cooking up crises during a polycrisis pantry.
Source: Riyana V Photography, 2023

2

DIMMING THE LIGHTS – COOKING DURING AN ENERGY CRISIS

POWER OUTAGES

LOAD SHEDDING

ROLLING BLACKOUTS

Cape Town's power generation capacity is vastly insufficient to meet local demand, leading to frequent power outages, load shedding (controlled power cuts), or rolling blackouts. South Africa heavily relies on coal-based power generation, and the aging infrastructure of power plants has led to breakdowns and reduced capacity, contributing to supply shortages. Over the years, there has been limited investment in building new power plants or maintaining existing ones, leading to an imbalance between supply and demand. The state-owned energy company, Eskom, has faced financial difficulties due to mismanagement, corruption, and debt. Compounding this, outdated or poorly maintained

infrastructure results in system failures, breakdowns, constraints on power delivery, and hours-long power cuts.

As South Africa grapples with this multifaceted energy crisis, the plight of marginalised communities facing energy poverty must not be overlooked. Financial strains weigh heavily on those already facing disadvantages, forcing them to maintain a parallel system in their quest for basic energy needs. While load shedding and power outages become the norm, the hidden costs of survival emerge as families scramble to secure batteries, candles, and power banks: expenses often overlooked and not factored into their already stretched budgets.

Enduring hours without electricity (sometimes 5-10 hours) demands meticulous planning and proves undeniably draining as the simple act of cooking, a fundamental facet of daily life, becomes an ordeal. Foods that demand longer cooking times, like beans, become impractical as the

energy costs become prohibitively expensive. In these circumstances, cooking using indigenous adaptations, open fires, or paraffin stoves become lifelines; however, such makeshift solutions bring new risks, particularly in low-income areas where the threat of fires looms large.



Figure 2 Cooking over fire to survive the energy crisis brings about broader issues around access to fuel woods for cooking and warmth, safety and open flames, and health and smoke, all of which are especially relevant in child-headed households.
Source: Riyana V Photography, 2023

3

ISOLATION: COVID-19'S BLOW TO WOMEN

THE HOME, ONCE A SANCTUARY,
TRANSFORMED INTO A
PARADOXICAL PRISON FOR SOME
AS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CASES
SURGED IN THE SHADOWS.

Women bear the majority of caregiving responsibilities, within both their homes and their communities. Isolation and social distancing mushroomed those responsibilities during the pandemic. As the pandemic unfurled, women found themselves straddling the frontlines of healthcare and essential services and bearing disproportionate burdens in upholding social capital. The home, once a sanctuary, transformed into a paradoxical prison for some as domestic violence cases surged in the shadows. With schools shuttered, women shouldered the brunt of caregiving and educational responsibilities, often juggling these demands with professional duties and caring for the sick, leaving them vulnerable to the creeping spectre of burnout. Economic hardships such as the ones suffered

through during the pandemic cast long shadows, leaving women more susceptible to job losses and financial instability. In informal sectors and domestic work, women faced heightened risks, while essential workers grappled with prolonged exposure to the virus and inadequate protection.

In Nancy Fraser's illuminating examination of traditional social capital theories (2022), she reveals how theory and the resulting policies often fail to account for gender inequalities and power imbalances within the fabric of societal networks, thus rendering certain forms of labour, particularly care work diligently undertaken by women, invisible within conventional social capital frameworks. Amidst the swirling tempest of COVID-19, the deep and distinct reverberation of this held true: demands upon women amplified, yet their contributions were trivialised by power holders.

As the world charts a course toward recovery, weaving the principles espoused by Fraser into our collective endeavours becomes essential. In our effort to highlight the impact of

polycrises through food, we used banana bread, an iconic South African dish, as a symbol of the home in COVID-19 crisis. Once an economical crowd pleaser that could be divided amongst our many guests and neighbours at parties, banana bread became a luxury and comfort food consumed entirely within a home that could afford it during the COVID-19 crisis. The Polycrisis Pantry laid out generations of women's tablecloths to create a feminine feeling

of home, care, comfort, and safety when serving banana bread and juxtaposed this sensation of togetherness by serving us apart: the bread, traditionally shared from a common plate, was individually plated and separated by small physical barriers. The bread served as a metaphor for the government's imposition of social distancing and isolation within our most private, connected, and safe spaces: our homes.



● **Figure 3** Covid Birthday Cake. Finally, we get to blow out our candles... apart together. These individual banana loaf cakes were served to replace the birthday many people experienced in isolation during the pandemic. Isolation during COVID-19 refers to the practice of separating individuals who have been infected or exposed to the virus from others to prevent the spread of the disease. Source: Riyana V Photography, 2023

4

CHECK, PLEASE: RISING FOOD PRICES



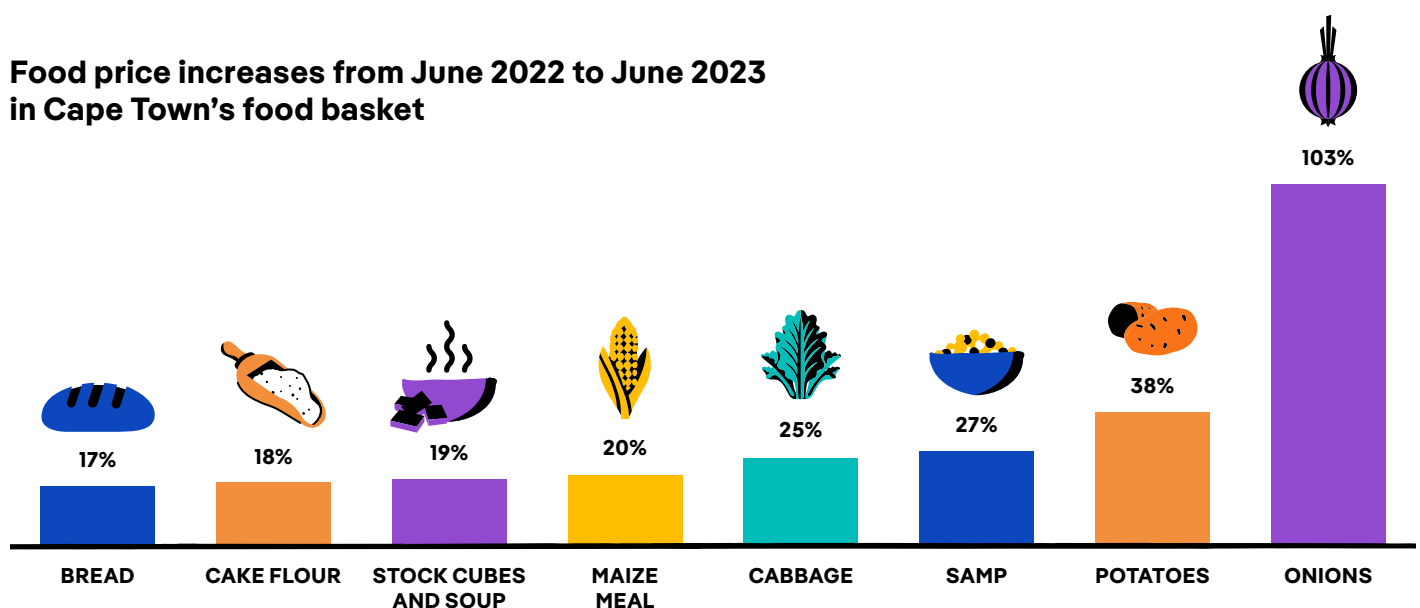
Figure 4 Is pap the only food that we can still afford? A war on the other side of the world sparks food price increases and spreads a silent violence thousands of kilometres away from the battlefields.
Source: Riyana V Photography, 2023

As economic uncertainties cast shadows over communities, the rising costs of food force individuals to reimagine their culinary choices. Stretching meagre ingredients to craft nourishing meals becomes an art form, a testament to the indomitable human spirit. In kitchens, resourcefulness blossoms and traditional recipes are reinvented as families strive to create sustenance from the most affordable basket of food for many in Cape Town's low-income areas. These foods are commonly based on starches; maize meal, flour, white rice, potatoes, with staples like black tea, sunflower oil, salt, sugar, and other vegetables namely onions, tomatoes and cabbage. Canned food like baked beans, pilchards, and cheaper cuts of meat like soup cuts, polony, and chicken feet also feature.

Understanding the impact of current food crises means delving into the cultural norms and practices that reinforce gender inequalities in accessing and consuming food. Our work examines how women's roles as primary caregivers and food producers are affected by rising food prices. The already heavy burdens upon women are exacerbated as they face increased

pressure to secure food for their families while grappling with limited resources and income. For example, when certain food items become prohibitively expensive, women look for cheaper alternatives or substitutes, explore informal markets for cheaper produce, opt for seasonal vegetables, replace expensive protein sources with less costly alternatives, or simply reduce the number and size of daily meals. According to the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice & Dignity Group (PEJDG, 2023), the cost of a typical Cape Town household food basket increased by 11.0% between June 2022 and June 2023 with significant price increases observed in foods commonly consumed in lower-income households: maize meal (20%), cabbage (25%), potatoes (38%), and onions (103%). Not surprisingly, the women running community kitchens at this time remarked that the number of people joining the queues for free meals increased dramatically while food donations decreased substantially, forcing them to make impossible decisions on who to feed and how they could personally subsidise community feeding programmes, often using elderly grants.

Food price increases from June 2022 to June 2023 in Cape Town's food basket



5

HARD TO SWALLOW – THE UNACCEPTABLE REALITY OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

GBV DWELLS WITHIN “NORMAL” DAILY LIVES.

Conceptualising gender-based violence on a plate was an idea that was repeatedly shelved as we were apprehensive about unwittingly trivialising the horrific intergenerational traumas that mark gender-based violence, particularly after a time where lockdowns meant that women experiencing abuse were unable to flee it. We wondered if we could create a satirical piece to celebrate and honour the tenacity of survivors as a checkpoint in their healing, yet respect the families and legacies of those who didn't survive and those who continue

to live in fear. The fragility and strength, fertility and richness of eggs as emerged as a metaphor as a starting point for discussion in recognition that we have to talk about the things that are hardest to talk about.

When writing this chapter, we were inspired by early feedback on the text, that if we ever do this event again, consider having guests eat their meal while standing on eggshells. GBV is not a meal that comes then goes. GBV dwells within “normal” daily lives. Life continues around the victim. The meal goes on. But, should one shift your weight even a tiny bit, the eggshells cut in a little more, the noose of violence tightens a little, and one is left feeling guilty and more entrapped for even thinking of stepping out of line. Those



Figure 5 Gender-Based Violence Devilled Eggs.
Source: Riyana V Photography, 2023

eggshells control your freedom, your movement, just as the patriarchy controls women in homes where power balances are unequal.

Crises situations exacerbate gender-based violence, including domestic violence and sexual assault and the risk thereof. Economic stress, overcrowded living conditions, and limited access to support services contribute to women's increased vulnerability. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the prevalence of gender-based violence, with women facing heightened risks within their own homes. Gender-based violence, the most sensitive of topics, intertwines with all other crises, magnifying the impact of frustrations and perpetuating cycles of poverty. Constantly surfacing as an intersectional issue in women's lives, it reflects deep-rooted patriarchal norms, fear, and the tragic invisibility of suffering.

In Cape Town, community kitchens became safer spaces for women who flocked to kitchens to seek support and share experiences during COVID-19. In recognition of this need, all women working in the community kitchen network are trained as GBV Ambassadors and support community members not only with plates of food, but also emergency support, shelter, and counselling services. Maintaining sensitivity in our research work requires introspection and an unwavering commitment to ethical practices. Listening to survivors' voices with care and respect and ensuring

their anonymity and safety are guiding principles in our work.

Dishing up and washing up

The symbolic significance of the last dish resonates with the spirit of communal unity. Within the realms of this culinary canvas, each ingredient represents a unique contribution and every person brings their own narrative to the shared table. Just as the act of cooking blends diverse flavours to create a harmonious dish, feminist research embraces the wisdom gleaned from lived experiences and the beauty of diverse perspectives and knowledge systems. And, just as women in crisis rely on their network of women to lift them into safer spaces, we, as a team of women in the kitchen and in research, forged relationships and drove up our own social capital in creating a safe space to unearth root causes of crises during stressful times. As we confront the complexities of our interconnected world, the concept of polycrisis comes into focus—an intricate tapestry of challenges, interwoven at both the global and local levels. Just as feminist research urges us to build knowledge 'with' those affected by crises, a menu of dishes helped us change perspective. By fostering an inclusive environment that values every individual's voice, we collectively craft a more vibrant and equitable world—a world where the shared table becomes a metaphorical tapestry that unites us all in the celebration of diversity and empowerment.

A FINAL TOAST: TO BUILDING A FUTURE TOGETHER!

As a research project, we have plated crises on a table, connected meals with the world's challenges, and evoked emotions and discomfort. In that, we have provided a powerful alternative approach to spark conversations beyond the shallow narrative of building back better and sensitise ourselves to the urgent need for action.

In this paper, we brought to the table meals on different themes from rising food prices and the charcoal flavour on our plates to the prevalence of crises in our foodway and landscapes. The interconnecting forces behind these seemingly disconnected crises became clearer to us as we set the meals into a menu and framework. Continual systemic economic systems developed through patriarchy drive these crises, capitalising on the struggles of the majority of the population. The industrialisation of our food system exacerbates the barriers to affordable, nutritious food as well; yet women continue to respond to crises and provide food for their families and communities by flexing

their social capital. However, other components within the polycrisis threaten that capital: lockdowns and energy restrictions disrupted social connections and support networks during COVID-19, for example. By exploring these intersections, we shed light on the layered and interconnected nature of crises. The experiences of women in community kitchens become a powerful lens through which we understand the complexity of these challenges and the resilience that emerges in the face of adversity.

Coping with crises is not a one-size-fits-all solution but rather a combination of ingredients, tailored to the specific context and challenges at hand. Building resilience to crises involves fostering strong social networks and community connections, empowering individuals to adapt and respond effectively and promoting gender-inclusive approaches and supportive policies. By prioritising emotional well-being, access to information, and sustainable practices, communities can

better navigate uncertainties and build a foundation for collective problem solving and resource sharing.

However, there's only so much community power, social capital, and the strongest bottom-up approaches can achieve; these initiatives need to be substantiated by more than band-aid programmes. It is imperative to confront and dismantle the root causes of structural inequalities in urban food systems, naming issues

of racism, patriarchy, and capitalism and recognising their contributions as ingredients with powerful flavours in polycrises. In unearthing each ingredient in polycrises and measuring its effect on our changing world's palate, we offer the opportunity to collectively rewrite the recipes for resilience, empowerment, and transformation. Just as women who struggled to feed their families during COVID-19 when basic foodstuffs were unavailable, we, too, can change, adapt, and chart our own futures, collectively.



Figure 6 Dishing up food for thought: The Cape Flats are a melting pot of flavours, spices, cultures, and dishes. Plating in the midst of polycrisis shows the richness of heritage and culture, from limpet phyllo baskets, dried fruits, smoked snoek samosas, frikkadels and dairy dishes.
Source: Riyana V Photography, 2023

DIGESTIF: UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTIONS

Our menu concludes with a digestif of uncomfortable questions. We dare to spice up the stew of societal norms, inviting personal beliefs to a daring culinary fusion, and challenging time-honoured recipes of established conventions. Let's walk home with some food for thought:

1

How does the erosion of social capital affect marginalised communities and how can a feminist perspective provide nuanced insights into the perpetuation and exacerbation of this multi-faceted challenges?

2

Amidst global crises, how do local communities' quiet struggles illuminate the interplay between grand narratives and personal hardships? How can we reconcile the urgency of global issues with the intimate challenges faced by individuals?

3

How can we untangle the complex web that binds polycrises? Beyond known drivers, how does a feminist perspective deepen our understanding of its impact, particularly on marginalised groups?

4

Where do the pockets of hope lie? And, are those pockets deep enough to lay a new spread on our table?

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