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## The Femivore's Dilemma

By PEGGY ORENSTEIN

Four women I know — none of whom know one another — are building chicken coops in their backyards. It goes without saying that they already raise organic produce: my town, Berkeley, Calif., is the [Vatican](#) of locavorism, the high church of [Alice Waters](#). Kitchen gardens are as much a given here as indoor plumbing. But chickens? That ups the ante. Apparently it is no longer enough to know the name of the farm your eggs came from; now you need to know the name of the actual bird.

All of these gals — these chicks with chicks — are stay-at-home moms, highly educated women who left the work force to care for kith and kin. I don't think that's a coincidence: the omnivore's dilemma has provided an unexpected out from the feminist predicament, a way for women to embrace homemaking without becoming Betty Draper. "Prior to this, I felt like my choices were either to break the glass ceiling or to accept the gilded cage," says Shannon Hayes, a grass-fed-livestock farmer in upstate New York and author of "Radical Homemakers," a manifesto for "tomato-canning feminists," which was published last month.

Hayes pointed out that the original "problem that had no name" was as much spiritual as economic: a malaise that overtook middle-class housewives trapped in a life of schlepping and shopping. A generation and many lawsuits later, some women found meaning and power through paid employment. Others merely found a new source of alienation. What to do? The wages of housewifery had not changed — an increased risk of depression, a niggling purposelessness, economic dependence on your husband — only now, bearing them was considered a "choice": if you felt stuck, it was your own fault. What's more, though today's soccer moms may argue, quite rightly, that caretaking is undervalued in a society that measures success by a paycheck, their role is made possible by the size of their husband's. In that way, they've been more of a pendulum swing than true game changers.

Enter the chicken coop.

Femivorism is grounded in the very principles of self-sufficiency, autonomy and personal fulfillment that drove women into the work force in the first place. Given how conscious (not to say obsessive) everyone has become about the source of their food — who these days can't wax poetic about compost? — it also confers instant legitimacy. Rather than embodying the limits of one movement, femivores expand those of another: feeding their families clean, flavorful food; reducing their carbon footprints; producing sustainably instead of consuming rampantly. What could be more vital, more gratifying, more morally defensible?

There is even an economic argument for choosing a literal nest egg over a figurative one. Conventional feminist wisdom held that two incomes were necessary to provide a family's basic needs — not to mention to guard against job loss, catastrophic illness, divorce or the death of a spouse. Femivores suggest that knowing how to feed and clothe yourself regardless of circumstance, to turn paucity into plenty, is an equal — possibly greater — safety net. After all, who is better equipped to weather this economy, the high-earning woman who loses her job or the frugal homemaker who can count her chickens?

Hayes would consider my friends' efforts admirable if transitional. Her goal is larger: a renunciation of consumer culture, a return (or maybe an advance) to a kind of modern preindustrialism in which the home is self-sustaining, the center of labor and livelihood for both sexes. She interviewed more than a

dozen families who were pursuing this way of life. They earned an average of \$40,000 for a family of four. They canned peaches, stuffed sausages, grew kale, made soap. Some eschewed health insurance, and most home-schooled their kids. That, I suspect, is a little further than most of us are willing to go: it sounds a bit like being Amish, except with a car (no more than one, naturally) and a green political agenda.

After talking to Hayes, I rushed to pick up my daughter from school. As I rustled up a quick dinner of whole-wheat quesadillas and frozen organic peas, I found my thoughts drifting back to our conversation, to the questions she raised about the nature of success, satisfaction, sustenance, fulfillment, community. What constitutes “enough”? What is my obligation to others? What do I want for my child? Is my home the engine of materialism or a refuge from it?

I understand the passion for a life that is made, not bought. And who doesn’t get the appeal of working the land? It’s as integral to this country’s character as, in its own way, Wal-Mart. My femivore friends may never do more than dabble in backyard farming — keeping a couple of chickens, some rabbits, maybe a beehive or two — but they’re still transforming the definition of homemaker to one that’s more about soil than dirt, fresh air than air freshener. Their vehicle for children’s enrichment goes well beyond a ride to the next math tutoring session.

I am tempted to call that “precious,” but that word has variegations of meaning. Then again, that may be appropriate. Hayes found that without a larger purpose — activism, teaching, creating a business or otherwise moving outside the home — women’s enthusiasm for the domestic arts eventually flagged, especially if their husbands weren’t equally involved. “If you don’t go into this as a genuinely egalitarian relationship,” she warned, “you’re creating a dangerous situation. There can be loss of self-esteem, loss of soul and an inability to return to the world and get your bearings. You can start to wonder, What’s this all for?” It was an unnervingly familiar litany: if a woman is not careful, it seems, chicken wire can coop her up as surely as any gilded cage.

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