



Women and Food

Women may have freed themselves from the kitchen, but at what cost?

by Joan Dye Gussow

THE OTHER DAY I WAS READING a paper in which one of my nutrition students commented on the difficulty people have in making rational selections of foods because of the enormous variety of items available in the average supermarket. She used the term "man-made foods." Not an original term, certainly, but it struck me that the phrase summarizes a lot of what has happened in our society to the relationships between men and women and food.

Women have a powerful historical association with food. To begin with,

biology has decreed that the physical production of the next generation of humans falls to women (which I happen to think is a good thing, by the way). And humans, unlike some other animals, are born dependent and remain so for a long time; if someone does not feed them, they die. Women can, of course, feed as well as produce children out of their own bodies. Perhaps because of those

awe-inspiring capacities, or perhaps simply because women were kept close to camp by toddlers, females have characteristically been the feeders of the species. Not only have they been responsible for food preparation, but to an extent unacknowledged until recently, women have also grown or collected much of the food their tribes survived on. Men's hunting, as it turns out, was lots of fun but not reliably productive.

When both men and women produced for their households in what are called "subsistence" economies,

the labor of both had only "use value," that is, it contributed usefully and directly to the family welfare. Psychologist Philip Slater has associated the move to produce goods that would have market value with the beginnings of patriarchy; men's dominance evolved, he suggests, out of their dispensability. Because men were less essential to the survival of the species, they had the leisure to specialize, to take up the production of spears or pottery for sale.

For whatever reason, men began to move the products of their labor out of the home, and women didn't. Yet women's "bread labor," as the pioneer American social worker Jane Addams called it, continued (and still continues in much of the rest of the world) to maintain the species.

Meanwhile, a new discipline, economics, began inventing a way to keep track of all the new and exciting activities of the marketplace; the familiar and continuing activities of the household were, alas, never accounted for. Indeed, valuing household labor has remained what economists call an insoluble problem. (Women may be forgiven for wondering aloud whether the problem would be as insoluble if men were doing household labor.)

Sexual politics aside, the issue has become critical where food is concerned, partly because the "unemployed" women of the developing world play such a major role in their food systems. Because their work does not "count"—that is, does not increase the gross national product (GNP)—it is often disregarded in development planning. When men from the countryside go off to factories or mines or into fields to plant cash crops, women are left to do the men's subsistence labor as well as their own. When, however, families move to the cities in search of a better life, the wife often finds herself without enough to do; unable to find a job, she cannot even contribute her former subsistence tasks. Although the family income may have increased, much of what the woman's labor formerly produced must now be purchased with her husband's wage. In these cases—as where women's subsistence gardens are displaced by high-value export crops, or where women's low-paid factory labor must help to support their families—family welfare may actually decline as the gross national product increases.

BUT IT IS NOT ONLY THE FAMILY welfare of poor women that suffers when the value of homework is disregarded. The price of progress in the world's food systems has also been high for Mother Nature and for those of us rich women whom development has been presumed to benefit. I will need to back up a little to explain what I mean.

It is appropriate to view women and food as part of a single system—actually a series of systems in different parts of the world. When food changes, so do women's roles; when women's roles change, so does food. If one arranges these systems along a continuum, then at one end are women who help prepare the family fields, grow and process food, fetch water and wood, make fires, cook, and serve. At the other end are women who can, if they choose, make use of freezers and microwave ovens to avoid almost all contact with raw food materials. Obviously if one looks simply from one extreme to the other, it is clear that women in rich countries are better off. They toil less than women in poor countries. But what are the side effects of "progress" in the food system? What happens to women and to food as one moves from subsistence to supermarkets?

In a subsistence economy food is simple. Its purpose—to assuage hunger and to provide a feeling of well-being—is easily recognized. Available foods are usually few in number and bear a close relationship to the plants or animals from which they derive. There are many producers, but few products.

In the United States, on the other hand, fewer than 3 per cent of the people grow food for all the rest, and two thirds of the food processing is done by fewer than fifty companies. These are few producers, but many products. The average supermarket has more than 12,000 items, the purpose of many of which would be unclear if it were not explained by advertising.

The raw materials for this dazzling array of food items are produced by the soil and water and energy and farmer skills of countries around the world. The United States food system mobilizes these resources in the service of an assumption that a steady rise in the GNP—regardless of what is produced—increases everyone's well-being. Neither food as our grandparents understood it nor its

home preparation is of much use to such a system. Because there are strict limits to how much food any individual can consume, food must be turned into products if it is to be transformed into economic growth. The more products, the higher the GNP, and the better off (presumably) the individual consumer.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether consumers are actually better off in a 12,000-item marketplace, it is becoming increasingly clear that the world cannot afford many food systems like our own. Our high-tech agriculture, treated as if it were turning out not sustenance but industrial raw materials, is in disarray: soil erosion has reached a dangerous level, and bankruptcy looms for a frighteningly large number of farm families, threatening us with the prospect that our base of farmland ownership will grow even narrower as corporations "bail out" farmers. Meanwhile, overseas, multinational "farmers" like Del Monte and Castle & Cooke have already commandeered the tropical lands on which subsistence farmers once grew their food, using the land to produce more raw materials for the rich markets of the developed world. The United States, richest country in the Western Hemisphere, now imports beef from Haiti, poorest country in the hemisphere, while poor Haitian farmers move farther up the steep, eroding hillsides to grow their food. The Earth's limits will prohibit poor countries from developing our kind of food system. Indeed we ourselves may not be able to continue much farther in the direction we are headed.

MY PRESENT CONCERN about women's relationship to food developed out of a painful recognition that much of what we call "progress" in the food supply is inadvertently using up or destroying around the world the resources necessary to produce food on a sustainable basis—for us, and for those hungry millions we mostly only read about. As a teacher I wanted to understand how people could be taught to attend to their long-term food security. It was clear that with so few of us still on the farm, too many of us have lost touch with what it takes in the way of resources and agricultural skills to coax food from the soil. As people move into cities around the world, more and more of them are coming to de-

pend on someone somewhere else to grow their food—someone who might or might not be protecting the soil from erosion, who might or might not be using up irreplaceable ground water, who might or might not be planting tomatoes only until he can plant condominiums.

Food security in the long term seemed to me to reside not in a global supermarket but in regional food systems whose food-producing resources could be locally watched over and protected. Yet as I quickly learned, any suggestion that women might willingly accept greater personal responsibility for their food in order to increase their long-range food security was seen as retrograde feminism. And when I proposed that consumers in general might actually choose to prepare and eat more local foods to support local farmers, instead of depending entirely on nationally or internationally distributed food products, I ran up against the incredulity and near horror of fellow nutrition professionals. For many of them have been taught to regard our near total freedom from contact with raw food materials as a hallmark of progress.

Just how powerful this food aversion has become was made clear to me a couple of years ago when my professional society was debating a membership resolution to change our name from the Society for Nutrition Education to the Society for Food and Nutrition Education. One of the members stood up and passionately asserted that it would be a mistake to change our name to include the word "food." Women in university departments of home economics were, she said, having a hard enough time being taken seriously without putting food back into the picture. Now that we had almost managed to rid ourselves of the cooking/home economics image, the last thing we needed was to have our national organization associate itself with *food*.

I was already clear about the fact that women have less power than men, and when I entered the field of nutrition in my forties—intending to save the world—it quickly became clear to me that women in my chosen profession, most of them dietitians or home economists, were particularly powerless. But what my colleague's outburst demonstrated for me was a striking notion: any association with food, once the source of much of

women's power, was seen as crippling, as unprofessional. What has happened is readily visible once you look for it, but less readily explained or remedied.

All kinds of pieces have been nipped off the idea of food: nutrition science, food technology, agribusiness, grain trading, and so on. And all those pieces that could be translated into power have fallen into the hands of men. Meanwhile, the only thing that is really important about food—that it should be used to feed people in such a manner as to make them physically and mentally healthy—has been totally deprived of power and status and left largely in the hands of women. (Indeed, university departments of home economics around the country have been changing their names in an attempt to attract men—and power.) So what we now have, as my student observed, are "man-made foods."

Exactly why we have such products and what having them has meant to women are topics some of us have begun to examine. That women have not benefited from product innovation in quite the way we are often told we have has been made clear in a number of recent feminist works of history. In my own investigations to date I have found no evidence whatsoever that cooking was, or is, a hated task from which food manufacturers rescued us, but rather that it is among the household activities women most like to do. And astonishing as it seems, I have also found no evidence that there has been any significant decline during the last fifty years in the total amount of time women of equivalent social class and family size devote to food-related activities. The nature of some of those activities has shifted, however; women spend more time shopping and a little less time actually cooking.

That latter shift is not surprising considering that progress has turned us all from producers into consumers—increasingly dependent consumers who can do less and less for ourselves. Home food-production competes with industrial cooking; women who grow tomatoes and make their own spaghetti sauces are of no use to this system except as potential customers for tinned pasta sauce (just as women who produce breast milk have been useful to the system only as they could be made into consumers of infant formula).

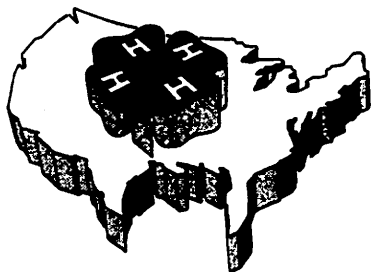
Women do not decide what commodities agribusiness will produce or what will be made from them; they don't even decide whether the tomato sauce on the frozen pizza will contain tomatoes or tomato extender, or what kinds of emotional appeals will be made to sell it.

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT WOMEN can respond in two distinctly different ways to the fact that men hold power over a now fragmented food system. We can, of course, join the boys. Or we can try to mend the system. As women have begun to seek power for themselves, some, like my colleague, have learned to *fear* food. Seeing that the traditional relationship between women and food confers no power on women, some who have not chosen entirely different fields of interest have become biochemists, nutritional scientists, food technologists, or even commodity traders and agribusiness executives—all professions that have surprisingly little to do with food. (Or they've become chefs. Cooking *outside* the home can be prestigious.) If food preparation is time-consuming in a time-obsessed culture, and if feeding is a devalued activity in a power-obsessed culture, then it makes sense to seek power where it lies, letting General Foods and McDonald's take care of the actual feeding. Microwave ovens, individual frozen meals, and Big Macs can solve the problem of fueling the species (although the question of whether they do so optimally is an open one).

But there is a painfully ironic coda to that theme. Many of the same women who flee, as disempowering, the image of woman as feeder—those who have abandoned any semblance of a producer's role in relation to food—are powerless consumers. Not only must they use their comparatively lower wages to pay more for food prepared by someone else, and not only must they spend more time shopping for food (making basically pointless discriminations between one or another product), but they often find themselves spending more time *avoiding* food than they might once have spent cooking it. An extraordinary amount of female time and energy is devoted to dieting, thinking about dieting, reading about dieting, and, lately, working out to work off the effects of food. Women have escaped from the field and the

4-H

INVEST SOME TIME IN AMERICA'S FUTURE



BE A VOLUNTEER 4-H LEADER

CONTACT YOUR COUNTY
EXTENSION OFFICE

kitchen only to be trapped by the vision of food and its consequences for feminine attractiveness that commerce has created for them. No longer concerned about where food is coming from, they worry now about where it is going!

Some of us are beginning to move in an alternative direction. Questioning the value of much that has until now been defined as progress, we are asserting that where food is concerned the freedom to consume—to choose between soda with and without calories—is much less deeply satisfying than the freedom to produce. We are trying to help create a new kind of food system that will sustain us and our descendants.

My husband and I have chosen to be part of this new system. We grow much of what we eat, freezing some for the days when the garden is under snow. And as a consequence, we eat very differently from the way we used to. We eat well, but our choices are reduced. So, of course, is the time we spend making them. When we buy food, we try to buy in season from local sources. (We also buy locally made "products"—tortillas from nearby Long Island, for example, rather than from Texas or New Mexico.) Several years ago we gave up bananas because we could not find any politically acceptable ones. For similar reasons we don't buy out-of-season nectarines from South Africa, apricots from the eroding Himalayas, or broccoli grown by Guatemala's Indians. We are happy to have found a source of Nicaraguan coffee whose production benefits the many *campesinos* who pick it rather than a few wealthy landholders.

To produce your own food and to design your own local food system is to give yourself power—whether you are a woman or a man. Will it change the larger food system? Not very much. Will it save the world? Certainly not. No single decision of any single family can do that. But it won't make things worse. And in a world that seems out of control, it is good to feel one is going in the right direction, away from man-made foods toward foods made by nature with the help of humans. ♦

JOAN DYE GUSSOW is head of the Department of Nutrition Education at Teachers College of Columbia University, in New York City.

Real Gardeners

Don't Buy Transplants!



In England, where gardening is a way of life, no serious gardeners buy transplants. They wouldn't consider it.

They carefully select seeds and cleverly grow them into their own transplants. But they do it in a very special way.

It's called APS (Accelerated Propagation System). APS is a complete, fool-proof, self-maintaining growing system. All you have to buy are your seeds. All you have to add is water and light.



TOTALLY AUTOMATIC

Your tiny seedlings will continue to thrive...even if you go away for a few days! You can do this because APS is self-feeding... self-watering...self-insulating.

And, it's designed to last for decades! It also makes a superb gift for gardening friends.

Each complete APS-40 features:

- Compact design (9" x 14")
- A 40-pot insulated re-usable tray
- Self-watering capillary-action mat
- Compression release board for balanced soil texture and easy release of transplants
- Drip basin with water reservoir
- Clear molded-plastic "greenhouse" cap
- Money-Back Guarantee

AVAILABLE FOR 1985 IN LIMITED
QUANTITIES. ORDER NOW TO
ASSURE DELIVERY. LIMIT OF 4 PLEASE.

Gardener's Supply Company

133 Elm Street, Dept. PCJ39
Winooski, Vermont 05404
802-655-9006

Please RUSH _____ APS-40 units at
\$7.50/ea. Plus \$1.50 for Postage and
Insured Delivery. (Limit of 4, please)

Total Payment \$ _____

Payment by Check Visa MasterCard

Card # _____

Expiration Date _____

Signature _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Please send FREE CATALOG of Successful
Gardening Solutions.