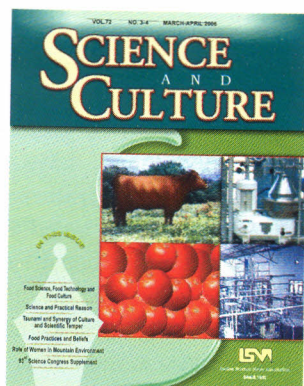


HUNTER-GATHERER LIFESTYLE AND ECONOMIC FREEDOM



The comments made by Jared Diamond in his book *Guns, Germs and Steel: the Fates of Human Societies* about the changes taking place in modern society as 'ending our millions of years of commitment to the hunter-gatherer lifestyle', may not be entirely correct. According to many anthropologists, men and women in the modern

age are going back towards the kind of roles they had millions of years ago— a hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

Hunter-gatherer lifestyle, in a sense, is more basic to the human nature because for more than 99 per cent of human evolution, we existed as hunter-gatherers. Modern humans diverged from the ancestors of the living great apes, about 7 million years ago, although fossils indicate that the evolutionary line leading to us to a substantially upright posture around 4 million years ago. Increase in body size and relative brain size started around 2.5 million years ago, with the *Homo erectus*, which was physically close to today's *Homo sapiens*. According to more modern thoughts, modern human beings arose in Africa around 100,000 years ago and then spread to other continents.

Around seven million years ago, all humans on earth fed themselves exclusively by hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants, nuts, fruits, roots etc. Men went out to hunt while women were out gathering fruits and plants, as well as small creatures like rodents and snakes. It was only in the last 11,000 years that Man started domesticating wild animals and plants and turned to what is termed 'food production'. The time at which they started deviating from hunter-gatherer style to food production was not accidental. The lifestyle of hunter-gatherer had become increasingly less rewarding around 8500 B.C., as resources (especially animal resources) had become less abundant or even disappeared. Available

evidence indicates that several large mammal species became extinct in North and South America at the end of Pleistocene epoch and some became extinct in Eurasia and Africa, either because of large climate changes or because of the rise in skill and number of human hunters. According to Jared Diamond, biology and geography (and not necessarily intelligence) determined who domesticated animals and plants, who developed what technology and who could survive the disease that evolved alongside domesticated animals.

With the advent of farming, gone was the simple life of the hunter-gatherer. Instead came a more complex and 'civilized' society. According to Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore in their book *Man the Hunter*, "to date, the hunting way of life has been the most successful and persistent adaptation man has ever achieved".

Many of the modern trends that we notice in today's advanced society are reminiscent of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. For example, is the rise of economically independent women in the modern age very new? Really it is not. The trend may appear very modern because we are still emerging from an agricultural tradition. Since the time human beings began farming, women were no longer the direct food earner and lost the enormous clout they enjoyed during hunter-gatherer societies. They learnt to assist men in producing food. In fact, the beginning of farming marks the beginning of the male dominated society. As the evolution into agriculture took hold, however, men controlled the primary economic tasks like clearing land, plowing fields and harvesting crops. In the farming lifestyle, men and women functioned as isolated, economically dependent units, whereas in the hunter-gatherer society women functioned as an economically independent entity. Anthropologists believe that in hunter-gatherer society, women held an equal status as men because they gathered about 60 to 80 per cent of the food for the family. In today's society women are becoming more and more economically independent and are approaching toward equality between sexes that they

enjoyed hundreds of thousands, even millions, of years ago. In 'deep history', as Edward O. Wilson calls humanity's primordial beginnings, the double-income family was the rule.

The trend towards smaller families may not be as modern as we think. With the beginning of food production and preservation, people started leading relatively sedentary lives and could afford to shorten the spacing between the births of their children. On the other hand, women gatherers could not afford to have more children, since they had to work in procuring food. The gap between two children was typically five years so that the older one had grown enough and required less care from the mother. Typically, women gatherers had four to five children, out of which, on the average, typically two survived childhood, the number we find more common in modern society.

In a lighter note, one may relate the modern trend of buying food with the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. According to Helen Fisher, a leading anthropologist, it probably harks back to an eating strategy our primate relatives adopted 50 million years ago. After farming took its deep root, many farmers preferred to have their food 'home-grown'. Even in the not-too-distant past, we saw people grow their own crops and vegetables, keep cows for milk, maintain ponds for fish and the yard for chicken. With industrialization, the home was no longer the "place of production" as it was in the farmhouse days— we no longer grow our vegetables or slaughter our chicken for the dinner table. Instead, we 'hunt' and 'gather' food items from the grocery store or restaurants and return to our "home base" to consume the food we have collected in the same way that hunter-gatherers had survived for so long.

The recent trend toward divorce and remarriage is another example of returning to the culture experienced by our primeval ancestors. The constant breaking and making of marital ties is typical of hunter-gatherer societies. It was only during the farming period that the idea of marriage as "till death do us part" gained momentum, for the simple reason that neither partner could pick up half the property and move off elsewhere. Immovable joint property in the farming age was a drawback to freedom. But as soon as men and women left farms for other jobs and came back with money- a movable, divisible property- we slipped right back into deeply ingrained patterns that

evolved millions of years ago. As Helen Fisher argues "A man is going to think a lot harder about leaving a woman who picks his vegetables than leaving a woman who is the vice-president of Citibank, because she can fend for herself and vice versa." Money makes it easy to walk away from a bad relationship. Indeed, around the globe, wherever women are economically powerful, divorce rates are high. It has been also observed, especially in post-industrial America, that a significant number of divorcees remarry—a pattern that existed in the hunter-gatherer societies.

All this points towards my belief that 'life with dignity' can only come through education, and more importantly, through economic independence for women. It is not

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uncommon to find persons amongst our 'educated' society who consider their wives useless as long as they do not have a direct earning. International Women's Day was celebrated in India, along with other countries, on 8th March more as an annual ritual— it is to be remembered that rural women represent more than a quarter of the total world population, and a significantly higher ratio in the context of Indian population. Their conditions are far worse than urban women. Rural women, who are mainly farmers, produce more than 60 percent of

the food in India; yet own only 2 percent of the land. The day when rural women begin getting land rights, and earn claims on other moveable property, will mark the beginning of women's lives with dignity. As more and more women become economically independent, they will begin to enjoy a life of dignity, mutual respect and freedom. The first step towards this goal is to spread the light of education in the rural areas— reaching both men and women— to build a modern mind unencumbered by superstitions and myths.

Men and women in industrial societies closely resemble the roles that were played by their primeval ancestors—the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. And according to Helen Fischer, this backward trend is a step forward in our march towards equality between the sexes. The Industrial Revolution in the West triggered off powerful economic forces that have begun to draw women into the paid workforce. It is no exaggeration to say that this has led to one of the most extraordinary developments in the long journey of *Homo sapiens* — the return of the economically powerful woman. □

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