

A WOMAN'S WORK...

YOUNG WOMEN ARE RECLAIMING DOMESTIC SKILLS, LIKE BAKING AND KNITTING, IN THE NAME OF FEMINISM AND SAVING THE PLANET. BUT DOES IT WASH, ASKS LOUISE CAROLIN



When I was a little girl, my grandmother was a regular patron of the local WI's various bake sales and bring-and-buys. Thus, the family benefited from home-made jam she hadn't made herself and strange, misshapen Easter eggs, daubed with swirls of pastel sugar-paste. But as the years marched on, the local ladies' interest in the Women's Institute waned and the supply of jam declined.

Now, more than 20 years later, the WI is enjoying a new dawn. The organisation founded to educate its originally rural members in domestic skills and crafts has attracted a new generation of hip, young city-dwellers, eager to take up the cake tins and darning needles their mothers rejected. Branches thrive in London neighbourhoods associated with a certain type of yummy eco-mummy – Stoke Newington, East Dulwich and Fulham – and more surprisingly in super-trendy Shoreditch.

'I'm really into knitting, sewing and embroidery,' explains Jazz Mellor, founder of the Shoreditch chapter, in a newspaper interview. 'We need to look at older crafts and reclaim some of those traditionally female pastimes.'

But do we really? Why?

There's certainly one strong argument for adopting the 'Make Do And Mend' ethos, and that's environmental. It's not just cheaper to bake your own buns (after the initial investment in baking tins, raising agents and a cute, retro pinnie, of course), it's better for the planet because your tasty treats come out of your oven and not two layers of non-recyclable plastic and a pollution-spewing factory. So, yay for home-baked goods! Yay also for acquiring the skills to mend your holey socks, instead of binning them, and knit your own jumpers, instead of investing in the British high street's ongoing rape of the third world. And again yay, for self-sufficiency – there really is something rather pathetic about younger generations' common inability to produce a nutritious meal without recourse to a takeaway or a microwave packet.

But I really can't muster a yay for the notion that it's women's work to cook, clean (using old-fashioned, eco-friendly lemon juice and

elbow-grease, natch), knit, bake, mend, sew and save the effing planet while we're at it.

And it barely needs pointing out that no one's encouraging men to take up knitting, join Stitch and Bitch covens or spend their weekends rustling up iced fancies in their sparkly-clean kitchens.

IT BARELY NEEDS POINTING OUT THAT NO ONE'S ENCOURAGING MEN TO SPEND THEIR WEEKENDS RUSTLING UP ICED FANCIES IN THEIR SPARKLY-CLEAN KITCHENS

Let's not forget that the domestic revolution that gave us freezers, washing machines, scarily effective cleaning products and microwave ovens also gave women the beautiful gift of time. Time to have careers outside the home, for example. Time for education. Time to take in the world beyond the net curtains and wonder how we might change it.

Seventies feminists were famously hostile to housework (or 'shitwork', as they called it) and who can blame them? They'd seen the drudgery, isolation and thanklessness of their mothers' domestic servitude from close up. They made it a priority to break the assumption that housework is women's work. They didn't entirely succeed; one recent study indicates that British men are still responsible for less than 22% of domestic chores, and that's before we get into child-raising or caring for dependent relatives.

Now, inspired by the current fashion for all things retro, young women are rushing to reclaim domestic skills as feminist hobbies. Like Marie Antoinette with her ribboned lambs, we play at 'wartime housewives', digging for victory in the cause of combating climate-change. Well, by all means, ladies, knit your own cupcakes. Get crafty and sew us all a safer planet. But when the vintage trend's over and jam-making's passé, will you be abandoning your eco-effort along with your pinafore?