

Ms. Fix-It

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While Hillary Clinton attempts to storm the Oval Office, some of her less renowned sisters are busy liberating one of the few other remaining male strongholds: the hardware store. Strange as it sounds in a country still steeped in Tim Allen reruns, gals are becoming fix-it guys. And at least in some places tools are replacing brass-studded leather totes as the newest female life-style accessory.

The home-improvement industry has always been a no-woman's land known for its drab aisles lined with nail bins and mysterious steel objects whose purpose was understood only by grunting guys in flannel shirts. Now it is going designer pink. Companies such as Tomboy Tools, Barbara K Enterprises and Girlgear Industries are offering the female do-it-yourselfer fabulous pink hammers and saws in stores and on the Web. These items usually fit snugly inside a smart satchel of the same hue, the tool box as it might be interpreted by Sarah Jessica Parker. Tomboy Trades, a Canadian concern, has also recently introduced adorable pink work boots; they also come in stylish, but less assertively girly, red, blue and green. Pink or blue, these boots are made for workin'.

There has been an explosion of womantargeted self-help books, videos, radio shows (including one called "A Repair to Remember"), TV spots and home-improvement Web sites. Some sites -- including bejane.com and toolgirl.com -- are specifically for women, while others offer female-friendly links and columns. Home Depot has introduced "Do It Herself" clinics for women interested in learning how to use a stud finder; the classes are evidently a success since, as NPR has reported, in some locales the store is becoming known as a hot singles spot. Even schoolgirls are joining the revolution. The Girl Scouts now offer a Ms. Fix-It badge for members eager to learn how to rewire a lamp or fix a leaky toilet, and an outfit called Vermont Work for Women has introduced a summer program called Rosie's (as in Rosie the Riveter) Girls promising "hands on instruction in the skilled trades."



It's not hard to see what's driving the fad: Women are increasingly home alone and emboldened. Perhaps the largest group eager to seize the pink hammer is single young women. Many of today's young women are marrying well into their 20s; an increasing number are waiting until their 30s. But they often aren't waiting for that gold band before they commit to a house or condo. The National Association of Realtors reports that in 2006 single women made up 22% of the U.S. real-estate market; the median age for first-time single female buyers was 32. It helps that having grown up with computers, cellphones and iPods, this you-go-girl! generation doesn't look at small machinery the way Barbie looked at math. These women are not only gung-ho about buying a home on their own dime; they're ready to lay the tile and patch the drywall too.

Other women learn the drill when they find themselves on their own after a divorce. Barbara Kavovit says that the epiphany that ultimately led her to launch her tool company, Barbara K!, came when her husband moved out of the house and took the family tool box with him.

But not every female tool-user is single or divorced. Sometimes she's a wife sick of hectoring her husband to make time to hang a bookshelf. Julie Sussman and Stephanie Glakas-Tenet were both wives of never-home CIA men (yes, *that* Tenet) when they wrote "Dare to Repair"; they have since added a video and another title, "Dare to Repair Your Car."

If you think about it, while the pinking of home improvement is new, it's not all that radical. Keep in mind that women are not trying to join the construction trades in any great numbers. Women make up at least half of the country's medical and law students, yet they still constitute fewer than 3% of construction workers; blue-collar sexual discrimination can't fully explain these discrepancies.

No, the pink-hammer brigade is less interested in expanding career opportunities for women than in enlarging the traditional art of homemaking. Not so long ago, custom limited women's activities in that area to cleaning, sewing, cooking and perhaps a few crafts projects for those with extra time on their hands. Installing smoke alarms and reconfiguring a closet are simply an extension of the old domestic urge. That helps explain why single women are twice as likely to buy homes than single men, despite having considerably lower median incomes. According to Fannie Mae, the number of single female homeowners will soon almost double, to 31 million by 2010 from today's 17 million -- at least that was the prediction before the recent mortgage meltdown. It seems that you can take women out of the kitchen and nursery, but you can't take them out of the nest.

Women tool-users are also part of a grand American tradition of self-sufficiency, manual competence and can-doism. On the frontier and in older farm communities, women, like men, had no choice but to cultivate self-reliance. But optimistic practicality also jibed with political principle, and it lives on today in our entrepreneurs and do-it-yourselfers.

The only thing to give pause in the pinkhammer revolution is the occasional whiff of ideology that emanates from its leaders. Hang around the movement's Web sites and before long you'll hear rhetoric that implies that learning to install a dimmer switch is not simply a practical means of increasing domestic pleasure; it's a Radical Statement for Women's Progress. "It's more about Empowerment with a capital E," reads the toolgirls.com manifesto. Most of the rhetoric is more Oprahesque heavy breathing than Steinem-style fuming, but it still may not be the most suitable tone to take around people preparing to take up potentially lethal tools. "My true desire is to inspire women to become more self-reliant and confident in their abilities," Barbara K! writes on her Web site. "We all have 'it' within ourselves to do things we never imagined we could."

Well, maybe. But the truth is that while women may want a lovely home, most of them would also like a good man to share it with. You can be sure that, unlike their female counterparts, few single men are spending their weekends restoring the crown molding in their living rooms. Men's domesticity has always been a group affair; they fixed the faucets and built the shelves not for themselves but for their wives and children. Women ought to know that selfreliance isn't everything.

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