

The Life of a Battery Hen

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"I am battery hen. I live in a cage so small I cannot stretch my wings. The air is so full of ammonia that my lungs hurt and my eyes burn and I think I am going blind. As soon as I was born, a man grabbed me and sheared off part of my beak with a hot iron, and my little brothers were thrown into trash bags as useless alive. My mind is alert and my body is sensitive and I should have been richly feathered. Humans, I wish I were dead, and soon I will be dead. Look for pieces of my wounded flesh wherever chicken pies and soups are sold."(Karen Davis, PhD).

When you hear the words "animal abuse" what is the first animal you think of? An image of a bird, dog, or other household pet may pop into your head, because these are the most common animals being mistreated by their owners. There are many forms of animal abuse, such as starvation, neglect, or physical abuse. There are also many different species of animals being abused, but a certain species in particular may surprise you.

A battery hen is a hen that spends the majority of its life inside a cage barely big enough to move around in. Its cage area is less than that of a piece of letter sized paper! This cage is called a battery cage and was first invented in the 1930's, and since then it has spread like wildfire in the poultry business. Battery cages are mostly made of all wire and contain a slanted floor. These cages are kept in big, windowless buildings and are often stacked on top of each other. Although the

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managers check the cages frequently for corpses, many of them are not seen due to poor lighting and this leads to the spread of diseases within the building. Female chickens are often put into these cages just weeks after hatching and they share them with four other birds. They are selectively bred to produce the largest amount of eggs possible. The males are not so lucky: most are suffocated, crushed, or minced and used as fertilizer. Hens living in these cages lay eggs which roll out onto a conveyor belt, along with any feathers or droppings which are disposed of. Food and water are delivered via the conveyor belts as well, during regular intervals, and sometimes the food may contain antibiotics or vitamins preventing infection in the hens and ensuring increased egg production. Most of these birds are killed after nine months, when they cease to produce large quantities of eggs. Many of these hens undergo “forced molting” meaning that they are starved after laying their eggs, forcing them to lay more eggs and start another laying cycle.

Battery hens suffer from a lot of diseases and deaths because of the unsanitary environments they are forced to stay in just to produce eggs for us to eat. Battery hens often develop muscle and skeletal diseases because they do not get exercise in their cages. They may suffer from weak or broken bones. Their claws become damaged and useless from standing on the wire floor for long periods of time. Their feathers often fall off and leave sore, red patches of skin from straining their necks through the wire cage to obtain food and water.

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A hen was created with certain duties in life and these duties are not given to the battery hens. "The brain of each bird is programmed with a complicated set of drives and responses that set it on the path to a life full of special territorial, nesting, roosting, grooming, parental, aggressive and sexual activities in addition to the simple feeding behavior."(Susan Richmond). A battery hen is not able to raise its chicks, create a nest, defend its territory, groom itself, search for food, or mate in a timely manner during the mating cycle. Hens are born with natural instincts telling them to build nests for their eggs, but because battery hens are not able to, they often hold in their eggs as long as they possibly can. They are denied the duties they were created for, and are given one duty by humans: producing eggs for people to eat. Animals should not be forced to give up their whole lives for our benefit. The hens cannot ever, during the course of their lifetime, stop laying eggs. "The worst torture to which a battery hen is exposed is the inability to retire somewhere for the laying act."(Richmond, Susan). It is unfair to the hens when they are treated in a way that humans would not ever want to be treated.

Like other animals, battery hens react to stress in negative ways. Most of them attack each other from time to time, pecking and throwing themselves against the cage. This sometimes kills or severely injures the birds. The weakest hens are sometimes pecked to death by their cage mates. So, to prevent this, most battery hen business owners remove the hens' beaks with heated iron knives periodically.

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This may prevent hens from hurting others but it does not prevent the pain they receive during the de-beaking process. The practice of de-beaking was first invented in the 1940's, for the purpose of preventing "cannibalism" in hens. "Cannibalism is a distorted behavior pattern in domestic fowl and game birds reared in captivity resulting from the abnormal restriction of the normal span of activities of a healthy, secure, ranging fowl. It includes vent picking, feather pulling, toe picking, and head picking."(Karen Davis, PhD). A machine called the "Debeaker" was invented for this purpose, and this procedure is performed on many battery hens. Battery hen behavior significantly changes after the de-beaking process, and the hens are unable to feed correctly, since they cannot peck to obtain food any longer. According to Karen Davis, "Partial beak amputation produced a number of significant alterations to the behavior of the birds. The birds pecked less at the environment after amputation than before and this difference can be interpreted as guarding behavior of a painful area of the body..." Hens sometimes develop sores and other infections on the beak area after amputation, and this sometimes leads to death. The de-beaking of battery hens is yet another way that these animals are maltreated during the course of their lifetimes, and it should not be allowed.

Imagine life in a house consisting of one dirty room barely large enough for a single person to fit in. Imagine someone being starved in that room, being forced

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to keep producing offspring who are forcefully taken from them every time.

Imagine that person going through an amputation of a vital body part, to prevent them from injuring someone else. Then imagine that person obtaining a deadly disease and slowly but surely wasting away in that room while nobody cares or does anything to help, until the day that person dies and the body is disposed of in a nearby trash can. This is the life cycle of many battery hens and it is very depressing to see them treated like that because although they aren't humans, they are indeed living things.

Although battery hen farms exist in many places in the world, there are simple ways to stop their productivity. First of all, never buy Battery Eggs. This may be a challenge due to the fact that they are often labeled as "Farm Fresh", or "Country Fresh", but don't be fooled by their misleading claims. Only buy cage-free or free-range eggs. Most supermarkets sell these eggs, but if they don't, people can take measures to make sure they do. People can write to their local supermarkets telling them to stop selling battery eggs and to start incorporating cage-free eggs into the store. Another option to consider is raising hens. Although the idea may be eccentric at first, hens make fascinating pets for children and are effortlessly tamed. They also produce a ready supply of fresh eggs and their manure is beneficial to gardens. If a large number of people work to stop battery

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hen farms, these innocent creatures will be able to live out their lives freely either in cage-free farms, or in the wild.

Just stop and think about battery hens for a moment. They are not any different from other animals and deserve to be treated the same way. They deserve to be content, even while living in farms, producing eggs for people to eat. All this is denied to battery hens and that is why battery hen farms are unjust. Battery hens are treated poorly by their owners and it should be outlawed. In a world where all humans are equal, shouldn't all animals be, too?

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