

Super Woman Gives

Way to Sensible Woman

By Diane Crispell

During my teen years in the 1970s, there was a TV commercial in which a liberated American woman sang the jingle: “I can bring home the bacon... fry it up in a pan... and never let you forget you’re a man... ’cause I’m a woman....” I remember the ad because it so completely encapsulated the emerging Su-

perwoman ideal, an image my generation saw as our future. We were women. We could earn money, run the home and be sexy, all at once. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

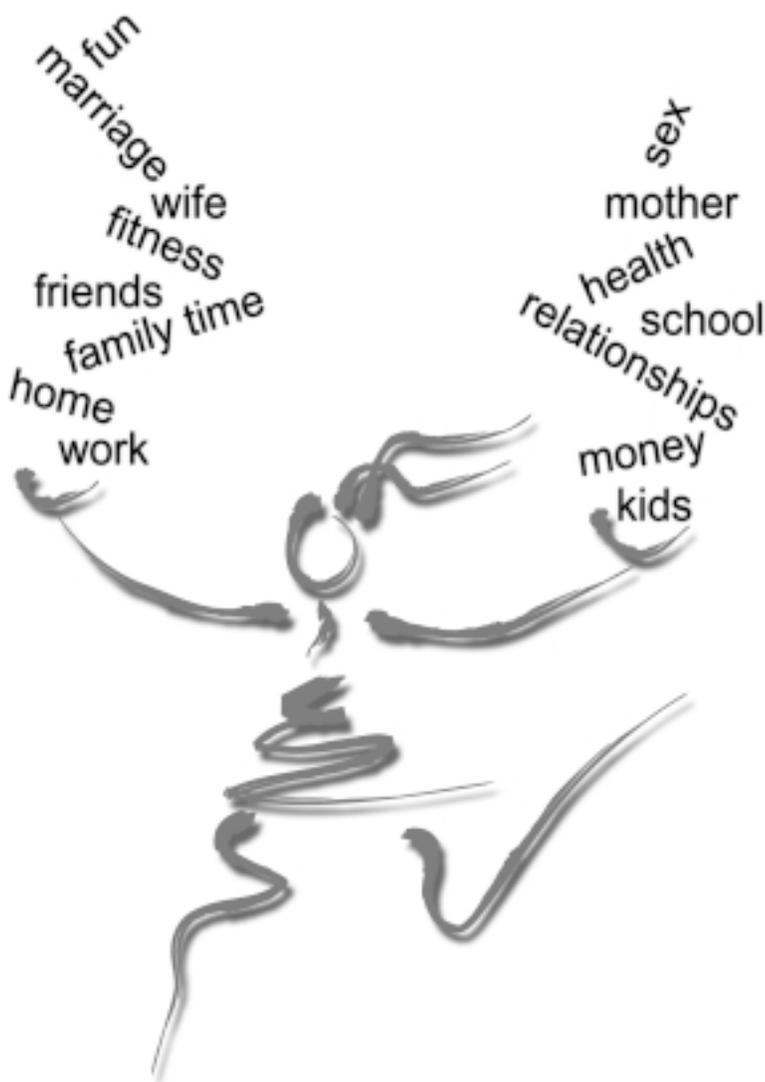
In retrospect, the Superwoman concept was less about *having* it all than about *doing* it all. Twenty-five years later, Ameri-

can women still want it all but have realized it’s not crucial to have it all at once. Juggling multiple roles, even desired ones, causes lots of stress. The way to combat it is to temper goals and pace. Women of 2000 are moving in these directions as they try to get the most out of life, without life taking the most out of them.

It’s readily apparent that women’s lives have changed a lot in the last few decades. In 1960, women earned a minuscule 3% of professional degrees in fields such as law, medicine and business. Today, that share is 42%. In 1960, 38% of women aged 20 or older were in the paid labor force. Today, that number is 60%. Although a gender earnings discrepancy remains, women control a great deal more money than they used to.

Women also have what amounts to total control over reproduction, if they so choose. Not that contraception was unknown before the 1960s; but more effective methods, combined with the attitude that it’s acceptable—even responsible—to plan families, has made an enormous difference in women’s lives.

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All these trends boil down to one key point. Women in American society today have more control over and choice concerning many aspects of their lives, including when or if they marry or have children, to what extent they pursue education and work, and the order in which they do all these things. This might seem like a win-win situation, but there is a down side, too, of course. As women have taken on new roles, they haven't dropped any of the old ones.

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Women admit that they bring a lot of stress upon themselves. Their top-ranked cause of stress is the amount of money they have to live on, something over which they have only limited control. But this is closely followed by something entirely within their control: the pressure they confess they put on themselves.

In third place is something over which women may *feel* they have no control: the amount of work they have to get done in a day. This includes more than paid work, of course; it includes housework, schoolwork, mom work, and all the other kinds of work women do. Having too much to do is a big cause of stress for mothers and women in dual-earner marriages. Mothers with young children and young single women are two groups more likely than average to cite a related cause of stress—lack of sleep—although presumably for different reasons.

Women see themselves as multi-faceted people. They define themselves first and foremost the same way men do, as individual human beings. Six in ten say their independence is “very important” in defining who they are as people. Being a good spouse or partner is key to the self-concept of similar numbers of women and men, as are appearance, health-consciousness, education, and sexuality. Yet women in 2000 are still more likely than men to also define themselves through their roles as caretakers—of children, other people and homes—as well as through their spirituality. In other words, their cups runneth over.

If the cup were merely full, life might be fine. And, in truth, the vast majority of women are happy with the choices they have. More than half say more choices for women provide greater opportunities for happiness. Nearly half agree that having more control and choices will continue to make women's lives even better in the next 20 years. Women are also largely content with the choices they have made. Few would change their partners, family lives, neighborhoods, or friends. Most wouldn't change their looks or jobs, either.

But the cup is not merely full, it's overflowing, with stress and guilt. American women worry more than men about pretty much everything, undoubtedly because they *are* the caretakers. One in four says she feels stress essentially every day of her life. These levels are higher than men's and higher than for women in many other countries.

The causes of women's stress are myriad, but a theme emerges—taking on too much. Some of the world's most stressed people are women who have taken on nontraditional roles by working in executive/professional or blue-collar occupations, and those who are combining traditional and nontraditional roles—namely, employed mothers. Among the latter, the challenges of combining jobs and kids peak in early middle age, which explains why women aged 30 to 44 are more stressed than both younger and older women. Who's least stressed? Older women. This could be partly because they have fewer day-to-day responsibilities. It's also likely they have weathered much in their lives and no longer worry about every little thing.

Despite the stereotypical martyr image, most women are not silent and stoic about the stress they feel. Two-thirds of working women admit the conflicting demands of family and work cause stress. They tend to feel worse about leaving family in the lurch than dropping the ball at work. About 6 in 10 mothers who work full time feel their work is an obstacle to doing things for family, feel bad about leaving their kids in the morning, and feel guilty they don't spend more time with their families. Relatively fewer, about 4 in 10, feel that family demands make it hard for them to devote complete attention to their jobs, and that it's important to focus primarily on work even at the expense of paying less attention to family matters.

Women's priorities are clear: they need, like and value their jobs, but their personal lives are more important. In contrast, men are less likely to report problems with various work-family conflicts, such as feeling bad about leaving kids in the morning when they go to work.

Women are famous for their multi-tasking abilities, the way in which they simultaneously bathe children, cook dinner, supervise homework (and write magazine articles). It's no wonder they occasionally burn a meal, forget the milk money, or lose a few marbles. But most manage to muddle through more or less intact. And at some point during the past couple of decades, women have begun to realize that maybe that in itself is enough. In an early TV appearance on the *Tonight Show*, a young comedian named Roseanne Barr challenged the Superwoman image with one that demanded credit for women's ordinary achievements: "If my husband comes home at the end of the day and the kids are still alive, I've done my job!"

Roseanne redefined the mild-mannered, dull-as-dishwater housewife as a sharp-witted "Domestic Goddess" who should be recognized as the paragon she is. A little appreciation goes a long way. But many women are still struggling for mere recognition of the efforts they make every day of their lives, much less active appreciation. Half of employed women would be happier at work if they had a more understanding boss. More than half of women, whether or not they work outside their homes, say employers need to exhibit greater understanding of women's dual roles to improve the balance in working mothers' lives. Four in ten full-time working mothers say their supervisors don't "understand that I have family responsibilities, too." The

same number "really wish" their families were more understanding about the demands of their jobs.

Understanding is just the tip of the iceberg, though. Women want help with the housework.

About 7 in 10 women with a spouse or live-in partner say they do most or all of the housecleaning, laundry, ironing and cooking by themselves. More than half say they do the bulk of the food shopping and child transportation. The only chores women say men do more of are the predictable ones: car care and home repair. One in four married women says her husband does not devote enough time and attention to family and household matters, up from 18% who said so in 1994. Women's expectations are rising, and men aren't necessarily keeping up.

Seven in ten women say men have to help more with household and child-care responsibilities before employed women can have greater balance in their lives. But there are some attitudinal obstacles in the way. Four in ten women with spouses or partners think the men in their lives "deep down" believe housework is women's work, and that any help they offer is a favor.

To be fair, women seem to have a problem letting go of household responsibilities. Four in ten believe women *ought*

to be in charge of the laundry, and about one in three thinks women *should* be the primary cooks and cleaners.

Furthermore, women may be trying to live up to unrealistic standards. A woman who recently appeared on *Oprah* spoke for many others when she confessed that she wants everything "just so" in her house, to the point of being obsessive-compulsive about it. Today's middle-aged women were largely raised by mothers who did not work outside the home. It is virtually impossible to work full time, then come home and maintain Mom's standard of housekeeping, yet many women try, which is why the manufacturers of home-care products won't go out of business any time soon.

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At the same time, women are starting to loosen up, which is why convenience food has a guaranteed future. When it comes to a choice among career, children, sanity, and cooking and cleaning, the answer is a no-brainer. Housework and home-cooked meals are the first things to go when women are trying to find more time for themselves. And, “deep down,” most women don’t feel guilty if they don’t do all the housework. They’re learning.

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Still and all, women seem to burden themselves more than they need to. Half agree that women’s lives could be better balanced if they would just put less pressure on themselves to be “su-

perwomen.” As with most issues related to women’s lives, men agree, but at slightly lower levels.

This brings us to the nub of the matter. There are two ways for women’s workload to be reduced. Women can do less, and men can do more. Both are happening. Men are becoming more involved parents, and women are willing to put off scrubbing the bathtub.

In the final analysis, though, women know it’s mostly up to them to do what they feel they must to live the lives they want to live. Money would help. So would another, more finite, resource—time. After money and control, additional leisure time is the thing American women say would most improve their lives. They are not alone. Given a choice, 40% of women aged 13 to 65 in 30 countries would choose to have more time rather than more money.

What would women do with more time if they had it? American women would improve their bodies and minds by devoting more time to their physical fitness and education. They would also spend more time involved with friends, hobbies, extended family, and religion. They would put extra time to

use improving their relationships with their husbands or partners, being active in their children’s lives, and making their homes comfortable.

They might also spend it doing absolutely nothing. A current media image of the American woman is the involved “soccer mom.” Here’s a confession from a real-life soccer mom: I have come to treasure those two hours a week I spend hanging around the practice field. I could bring work with me; I could catch up on mail or pay bills. I could run errands. But I don’t, and neither do the other moms. We just stand there and chat, about everything that’s going on in our lives. It’s enforced leisure of the purest kind. We may have belittled the coffee klatch of the 1950s housewife, but we understand it now. We deserve it, we need it, and, in the words of the justifiably long-lived L’Oréal ad campaign, we’re worth it. ●

Endnote

The information for this article is drawn from Roper Reports, a data service that interviews a nationally representative sample of about 2,000 American women and men aged 18 and older eight times a year, as well as the Virginia Slims Opinion Poll, a 30-year trend-tracking study of women’s changing lives conducted by Roper Starch Worldwide.