
Having it all?

Choices for today's Superwoman

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So much is expected of women today. It isn't enough just to do your best at home and on the job. We have to do it all. We're expected to be the perfect wife and mother, the impeccable housekeeper, the brilliant career woman ... all at once. We have housework, homework, gardening, cooking, family time and overtime to juggle. On top of that, we're still supposed to find time to work out and eat right. After all, we've got to do a little something for ourselves, right?¹

Superwoman has come under inspection. What does it mean to be a Superwoman? Is she really super? Does being Superwoman mean having to do it all or aim to have it all? Do the career and family prospects for women in the 21st century create a whole new set of obligations for us or do they genuinely give us choices? The

answers to these questions are the subject of this book. What follows is intended to inform the reader and stimulate ideas about our lives as contemporary women. We have the chance to gain education, career, family, good health and social, artistic and other skills and benefits which were not available to our parents and grandparents. However, along with these, come obligations and expectations for ourselves. This means hard work and abundant energy.

If we are not born having it all we feel obliged and excited about trying to achieve it. In the process we think we also have to do it all. This is stressful, tiring and potentially unhealthy and unrewarding.

What does it mean to 'have it all'? We all know of other women, and men for that matter, who seem to have everything – good looks, career success, a perfect relationship, wonderful children, money, good taste, self-confidence and a lifestyle that does justice to all of these things. But how do they achieve these things? Are they worthy, more so than we are? Were they born lucky, with a silver spoon in their mouths? Do they have the alchemist's power to turn base metal into gold? Or do we see them as cheats, charlatans, dishonest and unfair players? Are their lives based on privileges that are undeserved? How might we have it all?

The answer to this question is complex and often inconsistent. It doesn't make sense when we see others getting things they don't appear to deserve. Nor is it fair, that despite our best efforts we do not have the things that some others seem to acquire with ease – whether we are talking about possessions, relationships or psychological attributes such as an assertive personality or friendly disposition. When we think about having it all we have to think about three areas of our life in particular – what we are like as individuals, what we can do about changing or developing what we have made of

our lives up to date and how to cope with feelings of inadequacy and envy that thoughts about others inspire.

In this book I explore the lives of women who appear to have it all, or who aspire to having it all or who have tried and given up, or perhaps more accurately, have taken a step back, looked at their lives and what is truly of value to them and modified their unrealistic, and frequently punishing, aspirations and behaviours. That is not to say that striving to achieve, seeking what is best for our loved ones and ourselves, is not of value. It is. To do things well and get the best from ourselves in most situations is an empowering, positive, life-enhancing and inspiring experience.

What is important is how and why we achieve what we do. We need to set realistic limits to our aspirations and goals and link the effort to the outcome. In other words we need to understand our potential and expend the amount and kind of effort that is required to achieve it. It is not healthy or in any sense beneficial to set out to accomplish things that others have attained just because they have done it and we haven't. To be truly successful we need to think more about ourselves, and of ourselves to gain a helpful and secure understanding of what is possible and find a means of peace in that knowledge. Beyond that lies the pathway to self-destruction via envy and a stressful lifestyle that finally leaves you exhausted and empty. But why should we have to discuss this at all? Surely it is common sense that we cannot and should not have it all? Our upbringing, the wider culture, religion, schools, universities, governments – all these institutions give out messages that suggest resources are limited. Even those with the greatest power and privilege in society don't all get what they want. How many of us can become President, Prime Minister, chief executives or top lawyers, doctors, journalists, artists and so on? By definition, very few of us.

However, for many women, the pressure has been on, particularly over the last 10 to 15 years. If there are opportunities to get into a high-status profession – better take it. If women can get to the top – better try. You are not truly realising your potential if you don't also have the partner and family. You are neglecting them if you don't give them quality time. You also need friends, and they need some of you too. What point is there in success if you lose your looks? The pressure is on and on. How does the average, talented, warm-hearted, potential Superwoman resist the pressures to have it all and remain sane and reasonably happy? How do you cope with the paradox that by not striving to have it all, by making sensible and realistic choices you might gain fulfilment? In what follows there is an attempt to solve this conundrum and help potential Superwomen to manage to be just that through gaining peace and emotional enrichment that comes with self-knowledge and confidence.

Identifying the pressures: what we want, what we don't want

These days, an important part of a positive image is to appear physically fit and mentally alert, especially in the workplace. The working environment is increasingly competitive, and there is also a trend at present for one person to do the work of at least two people. So it is essential to look as though we can stand the strain and cope with the workload. Our personal lives are often just as demanding as we try to fit more and more into what may already be a hectic lifestyle.² Self-help manuals are encouraging:

Making life easier should be the motto of every working mother – here you will find the practical help to do so. There's a no-need-to-think cookery section, including a stress-free guide to entertaining, plus a too-tired-to-think party planner for birthday bashes. You'll feel better if you can squeeze in time purely for yourself. There are plenty of ideas for recharging your batteries, with or without your partner, but definitely sans kids!³

Women are more determined than ever to get to the top. The problem seems to be that as they get closer, something stops them – the so-called glass ceiling. ... This book considers some of the main factors which contribute to this glass ceiling and suggests ways of breaking through.⁴

Much has been written about women and how we can improve our lives. How we might be better mothers, move to the top in management, achieve the perfect relationship, be amazing cooks, juggle work and home, improve our body-image and self-esteem, learn to dress for success and heal our minds. It now seems possible for women to have it all – at home, at leisure and at work – provided we take the right advice and make the right decisions. The subject matter of advice-bearing books, magazines and television programmes is how we, as women, might be better than we are. The implication is that we are not naturally perfect women, but that perfection can and ought to be achieved. We owe it to ourselves, our loved ones, our colleagues and the rest of the world, to aspire to be perfect. We deserve to and can now have it all.

But where did these ideas come from? Why should we want to have it all? Why do we need to be perfect? What is 'perfection' anyway? Is the achievement of perfection a

right or a responsibility? Do men experience the same pressures? Who determines the characteristics of the perfect woman? What would happen to us if we let go of these aspirations?

We all need to stop and think, to gain a balance in our lives. To do so brings with it personal effectiveness and peace of mind. For so long, the emancipation of women in Western societies has put pressure on us to achieve the (almost) unachievable: to be the perfect woman while winning in the world of men. We believe we have to succeed at work, because we have the opportunities, talents and abilities. We also believe, that because of those opportunities we have to prove ourselves even more so domestically. We are feminine and womanly, even while making it in the professional world that was formerly only open to men.

The pursuit of perfection in all things consumes endless energy and leaves us feeling like a leaking battery – never having the chance to recharge. This leads to mental and physical exhaustion. Experts call this the result of pursuing the Superwoman syndrome. Superwoman gained prominence in the late 20th century and, despite efforts to demolish her influence, she remains the icon of the 21st century Western woman. She makes the most of her opportunities and so seems to have it all – motherhood, love, fun, confidence, success and the admiration of others. Shirley Conran, who made a well-known attempt to demolish the myth, suggests that:

I had noticed a growing anxiety and depression among ordinary women as the result of media propaganda about females who effortlessly organise a career (not a 'job'), home, husband, children and social life, while simultaneously retaining a 24-hour

perfect hairstyle and doing something esoteric, such as learning Japanese in their spare time.

But I suspected that no-one could achieve everything that the traditional woman was supposed to do, let alone this demanding, exhausting, super-achiever that threatened to depress our lives.⁵

The conundrum we face is clear. Women have always been expected (and expected themselves) to cope with a great deal – to manage and support the lives of their families, be physically and emotionally ‘attractive’ and when necessary to earn money to supplement the main income – but in the past we were supposed to have done so quietly and leave the accolades, limelight and the glittering prizes to the men. Changes in sex-roles, technological advances in the home, educational opportunities and economic changes have all led to increased opportunities and expectations for women. Women who do it all (like the stereotype Conran describes above) also may have it all. We are thus in a bind – there are these iconoclastic role models to live up to. Their lives seem to be glamorous, exciting and fulfilling. They also seem to achieve all of these things with ease. The other side of the coin is that there are not enough hours in the day to put in the work towards perfection and to achieve it without some cost to health. Thus self-help manuals show both how to achieve and how to resist having to achieve as Superwomen. But the myth will not disappear.

Exposing the myth of Superwoman

Superwoman still needs to be exposed as a myth. So many of us have tried to achieve the Superwoman distinction

but have inevitably failed. Superwoman is, by definition, super-natural. She cannot exist – and she should not exist because to live as Superwoman is to fail. She is the siren, luring women towards anxiety, stress and self-punishing. Choices can be made that are self-enhancing rather than self-admonishing. We need to heed our own needs, to be aware of our feelings and value ourselves for what we are and may choose to become in our own right. To do this, the first step is to understand the Superwoman myth for what it is and for what it might do for our self-esteem and need to achieve. The second step is to pay attention to who we really are and look after ourselves in that knowledge.

Consider the following essay question set for students of English literature:

‘Elizabeth is one of the finest products of our civilisation – strong and intelligent, yet bewitching in a completely feminine way’. Discuss Jane Austen’s portrayal of Elizabeth Bennet (in the novel *Pride and Prejudice*) in the light of this claim.

Think also about the message underlying the headline ‘“Superwoman” myth goes into retirement’ in the *Houston Chronicle* in October 2001:

‘I tried to be the perfect wife, mother, teacher, homemaker and lover’ admitted a 52-year-old American academic. She went public to the media and her employer about her decision, after 3 decades of chasing the Superwoman myth, to have more balance’ in her life.

Superwoman Syndrome, in spite of this, seems to be alive and well not only in our minds but also in the public

consciousness. Various experts, psychotherapists, best friends, journalists and internet agony aunts, continue to offer advice to those who strive for power, love and feminine perfection and feel the strain. The paradox though is that the more consciously we recognise the Superwoman as an impossible achievement, the more we are exposed to images of the mythological in popular icons. In a recent magazine article⁶ about Nicole Kidman, the movie star focused specifically on her struggles as a single parent following the break-up of her relationship with Tom Cruise. It was illustrated with model-style photographs of the 'talented Miss Kidman' and peppered by quotations from men colleagues:

I knew she would be a star when I first worked with her. She's extremely intelligent – and that is a rare thing in an actor, I'm sorry to say. You can actually have an intelligent discussion with Nicole about the purpose of a particular scene and what you want from it.

(Geoffrey Burton, award-winning cinematographer and director who worked with Nicole on *Dead Calm*.)

and:

You meet a lot of beautiful people in this business but there's something almost luminous about her. I wish I had a clause in my contract that said Nicole Kidman had to be in all my movies.

(Joel Schumacher, director of *Batman Forever*.)

and:

She's also one of the funniest people I've ever met, as well as one of the most glamorous – but it's impossible to hate her.

(Iain Glen, co-star in *The Blue Room*.)

The movie star herself though, in the piece about her life, comes across as modest, intelligent and self-effacing, attributing her strength in coping to the support of her women friends and the role model of her mother in particular. She says about her mother:

I adore her for her intelligence, her wit and what she gave up to help me and my sister. She could have been a doctor, but she chose not to be. She still worked through our childhood, but she was always there for us and gave us a great education and belief in our own power. When I was seventeen, she survived breast cancer, enduring chemotherapy and radiotherapy, and struggled with the notion of death. ... She's pragmatic and strong but still sweet.

There is an endless cycle of pressure it seems – the movie-star icon has the perfect mother as her role model and protector. Superwoman is modest and owes all to another Superwoman. Kidman herself talks of her doubts, fears and weaknesses. The media image, though, uses those to strengthen her mythical status through the photographs and the quotations from those around her. We see the beauty, the strength and the modesty and thus the admitted weakness emerges as strength. How can we not at least try to be as good and as courageous as Nicole?

Being true to yourself: making your own choices

What follows is aimed at all of us who have tried to achieve what (we think) other women have done – the dazzling

careers, financial success, happy and fulfilling emotional lives, 'two plus' well-adjusted children, a strong and supportive intimate relationship, friends, a social life and popular acclaim as a strong, virtuous and feminine woman. And most of us have found ourselves wanting. Whether we gear up towards making even greater efforts at 'success' or make serious choices about our priorities, depends very much on how far we have absorbed the Superwoman myth into our hearts and how far we are prepared to face up to our limitations.

But why does the need to achieve in these ways touch upon our lives so strongly? Why should women strive for Superwoman status at all? How do we cope with the successes and the failures that occur every step of the way as we chase our aspirations?

The possible solutions to these dilemmas seem to be as angst-ridden as the questions themselves. For instance, should women as a group 'return' to full-time motherhood and concentrate on running the home? Should women make the choice between family and career? What is the 'balance' with which erstwhile Superwomen choose to supplement their lives? What price might be paid by womankind for the universal return of the Earth Mother? But wait ... even Earth Mother's 21st century incarnation – the 'domestic goddess' – is 'super'. She may not long for career success to the extent that her super predecessors did, but she does demonstrate excellence: in the nursery, in the kitchen and in maintaining her perfect appearance. Thus (we assume) she has a perfect relationship as well.

Most women who have travelled the route to Superwoman status reach a point where they have to cut their losses and minimise the 'collateral damage' that having it all brings about: the adverse effects on their family, friends and psychological and physical health. This seems unfair. Equality of opportunities and the legacy of

feminism mean that talented women should have the right to seek the recognition and acclaim they deserve alongside their male counterparts. The problem is that men can choose to be successful at work and take on a minimal role at home and still be perceived as reasonable human beings; and, provided they don't inflict deliberate damage on the family, they are not criticised as 'bad' fathers.

Not so for women, of course. The 'good' mother and woman (and Superwoman has to be good') are only able to treat child care and career equally if the children thrive. Any threat to the children's welfare and she suffers – personal guilt and public criticism.

The dilemmas surrounding the Superwoman Syndrome and how to cope with them are what follows.