

Superwoman in the 21st Century

By Lisa Selin Davis The New York Times May 30, 2021

“Supermom is just another way of saying, ‘Women do it all. Men don’t do very much.’”

— Letty Cottin Pogrebin, a founding editor of *Ms. magazine*

In 1979, Charles of the Ritz, a beauty brand, released a new television commercial for its Enjoli perfume.

“I can bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan, and never, never, never let you forget you’re a man,” a blonde woman [croons](#) while dressed in a powder blue suit, then a peach bathrobe, and then a lavender evening gown. Women bought the product — and the message attached to it — [in droves](#).

The song itself was a rehash of Peggy Lee’s 1963 tune “I’m a Woman.” But in retrospect, it also seems like a prescription for “supermom,” that archetypal female who is both a career woman *and* a housewife, and whose to-do list spans cooking, cleaning, parenting, earning a substantial paycheck and sexually satisfying her husband — all without a hair out of place.

Many Gen-X women, some the daughters of feminist activists of the 1970s who fought for the right to work outside the home (and be paid equally for it), grew up believing that was precisely what was expected of them: that they should work full-time while also overseeing everything in the domestic sphere, with very little support in the form of legislation that might facilitate this zeitgeist shift, like subsidized child care or paid family leave.

Plenty of wives and mothers were already doing everything. But for many entering the work force for the first time, working didn’t turn out to be liberation as much as a [second set of responsibilities](#) added to women’s already full plates, as many feminists, [economists](#) and [journalists](#) have noted.

Ironically, as women’s paid work hours increased around the 1980s, so did the supermom practice of “intensive mothering,” said Jodi Vandenberg-Daves, author of “Modern Motherhood: An American History,” and professor and chair of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

Intensive mothering meant “constantly watching out for too much junk food, or making sure kids are getting their sunblock, or being careful about what they’re watching on TV, or ‘stranger-danger,’” Ms. Vandenberg-Daves said. “All those things crop up right at the moment when women are also more

involved professionally. And it helped create that sense that no matter what you're doing as a mother, it's not enough."

That existence was so taxing that in 1984 the writer Marjorie Hansen Shaevitz coined the term [Superwoman Syndrome](#). "I found that, professionally, some women were at the top of their field," Ms. Shaevitz said. But "emotionally and personally, they were a mess." The problem was that they were trying to "do it all" perfectly, and that simply wasn't sustainable, she said. [Some studies](#) have found the do-it-all expectation is particularly trying for Black women and contributes to health disparities.

[By the early 2010s, Momfluencers](#) and C-suite women began advising mothers to "[lean in](#)" — as if it were not too much to sew Halloween costumes *and* cook beautiful meals while *also* presiding over an economic empire.

"Mothers are doing a bunch more paid work and they don't seem to be doing any less unpaid work," Michael Madowitz, an economist at the Center for American Progress, said of moms in the past decade. "In fact, they're doing more unpaid work."

"Feminists have been bashing and trashing the whole idea of the superwoman, the supermom, from the beginning," said Letty Cottin Pogrebin, a founding editor of Ms. magazine and author of 12 books, including "Getting Yours: How to Make the System Work for the Working Woman" (1975).

"Supermom is just another way of saying, 'Women do it all. Men don't do very much.'" (Meanwhile, plenty of women have been doing it all for eons.) "My definition of a supermom is a single mother," Ms. Pogrebin said.

Then along came the coronavirus pandemic, which not only [exposed the inequities](#) between men and women, but [intensified](#) them, too. After years of leaning in, some women [tumbled into the abyss](#).

As devastating as the pandemic has been to mothers, it may also be the moment many have been waiting for, say some academics and experts, as stories of harried mothers [fill the news](#) and the Biden administration explores [policies](#) that better support them.

Greater gender equality in the home and in business *could* be a silver lining of the pandemic, said Ms. Vandenberg-Daves, if we make it the focus of our economic recovery and redraw the boundaries of family life, retiring the imposing, impossible figure of the supermom.

"This is a moment for us to put gender back in our conversation," Ms. Vandenberg-Daves said. "Let's demystify parenting and talk about these gender inequalities and how they harm the possibility for a democratic family."

What many mothers need is a "Superdad, or a Superpartner," Ms. Pogrebin said. "We should all be putting in the same degree of energy to succeed at the same goal, which is to have a house that functions efficiently and to raise children who are happy and challenged."

While men are doing more than they used to in terms of child care and housework, women in two-parent heterosexual partnerships — around [60 percent of families](#) — still spend [six to 8.5 hours more](#) a week on unpaid domestic tasks like child care and cleaning. Or, as Ms. Vandenberg-Daves said, "In heterosexual families, men are often doing more than their fathers did, but less than their

wives do.” (She points out there is often more parity in [L.G.B.T.Q. families](#).) And men may still be doing [different parenting work](#) than their wives: more of the enjoyable stuff, less of the arduous stuff.

“When men started to get involved in child care, child care started to divide itself into the fun parts — like going out sledding — and the yucky parts, the maintenance and enrichment parts, like getting the toys put away or doing the diapers,” Ms. Pogrebin said. “Who skips a half-day of work to go to the annual pediatrician checkup? Who stays home when they’re sick? Who gets up in the middle of the night? I submit that if you have two people raising children, ask who knows their shoe sizes and you’ll know who the primary parent is or whether there’s fair responsibility for those tasks.”

Nowadays, we do have more cultural models of caregiving men — think of celebrities like [John Legend](#) or [Chris Pratt](#) gushing about fatherhood and wanting to be involved in their children’s lives. But, Ms. Vandenberg-Daves said, we skipped over the hard work of analyzing the different tasks and roles: “We’ve never really trained men to focus on what gender equality looks like in families. We don’t have a *Working Father* magazine like we have a *Working Mother* magazine.”

One way to start creating a more equitable household, Ms. Pogrebin suggests, is to simply get a legal pad, draw a line down the middle and mete out the tasks so it’s even between parents.

“If you want to live in a democratic society, you have to start with democratic families, because otherwise hierarchy is built-in and hierarchy becomes expected,” Ms. Pogrebin said. Raising a child in a democratic family, in which parents create a kind of work-life balance within the home, is a gift, she added. “It prepares kids for life in a democratic society where equality is seen every single day. You can’t be it if you haven’t seen it.”

This also means looking at *how* we raise our children, she said. “Part of our jobs as parents is not raising girls who are going to be supermoms or boys who are going to expect women in their lives to be superwomen.

Ms. Vandenberg-Daves also notes that some policies — like universal child care or paid family leave — would be game-changing. “Women are supposed to absorb all the things that society won’t do with public policy and workplace reform,” Ms. Vandenberg-Daves said. “Maternal sacrifice is supposed to make up for lack of child care, lack of affordable housing, lack of safe places for kids to play.”

Historically, government hasn’t had to kick in because mothers have functioned as the American social safety net. “When you think of the gross domestic product,” Ms. Pogrebin said, “how much of it is the result of the invisible, unpaid work of women?” She added, “So many people benefit when women overproduce, when women feel judged and therefore have to become so performative, when women are made to compete with each other — whether it’s for men, for jobs or for the title of ‘best mom.’”

That may finally be changing, as the Biden administration has included policies like subsidized [child care](#) and paid leave in the president’s proposed infrastructure plan.

But cultural expectations also need to be redrawn. In the 1980s, for instance, Sweden had a [paternity leave campaign](#) with posters of a famous weight lifter holding a naked baby in his arms, to model for the country that taking paternity leave is masculine.

“Think what that does to a society when you don’t just normalize, you glamorize, you valorize that role for men,” Ms. Pogrebin said.