



THE RETURN OF THE Happy Housewife?

Are today's twenty-something women really saying no to the idea of having it all and yearning for a return to the happy housewife model of the 1950s? Well, yes and no. What they're actually doing is paving a whole new path of their own. And it could just be a path to the most liberated generation of young women yet. By Laura Venuto.

THE WEDDING PAGES in the Sunday papers are not a section I spend a great deal of time perusing, much less contemplating. But last Sunday something caught my attention. Aside from the seven groomsmen wearing matching *Blues Brothers* outfits, the thing that shocked me most was that all but two of the brides were not only under 30, they were under 25.

What happened to the 'Sex and the City' generation who achieved everything else first (career, travel, life experience and at least five years of bad dating encounters), before they properly started looking for a partner, leaving many to walk down the aisle well into their thirties? Of course, one Sunday paper does not a trend maketh, but added to this have been a number of articles in newspapers and online suggesting today's twenty-something women are rejecting the superwoman lifestyle of the previous generation, where career, marriage and motherhood were juggled simultaneously, and are instead reverting to the happy housewife model of the 1950s.

Four years ago *The Independent* newspaper in the UK ran an article titled 'Desperate to be housewives: young women yearn for 1950s role as stay-at-home mums.' It reported that

according to a survey in a British women's magazine, "The average 29-year-old now hankers for a return to the lifestyle of a 1950s housewife. The daughters of the *Cosmo* generation of feminists want nothing more than a happy marriage and domestic bliss in the countryside."

In March this year a *Courier Mail* article declared young Australian women felt much the same: "In a post-feminist world where a woman can take her pick between career, family or a juggling act of both, the latest social phenomenon involves women making a return to the traditional roles at home. The seductive appeal of cooking, housekeeping and family is increasingly favoured by women tired of pushing the boundaries of an ever-present glass ceiling."

Columnist Mia Freedman responded soon after, asking young women on social networking site, Twitter, for their opinion on the happy housewife phenomenon. In her *Sunday Telegraph* column she wrote: "Of the hundreds of instant replies, some were stridently opposed ('I'd rather have a life than be a wife') but the consensus was generally 'yes'. Who knew there were so many 23-year-olds out there baking, crocheting, gardening, marrying, procreating, making their own pasta and having Tupperware parties?"

But could this really be true? Could a whole generation of young women, who enjoy more freedom and equality than any generation prior, really want to turn back the clock to a time our mothers and grandmothers tried very hard to change?

Yes and no, say social researchers Mark McCrindle and Rebecca Huntley, and KPMG demographer Bernard Salt. All three say the current generation of twenty-something women are nothing like the 1950s woman – they have a higher tertiary education rate than men, are the first generation of women to experience true wage equality, and according to a recent ABS survey, are finally experiencing more equality in their relationships too, with modern men helping out more around the house – and they have no desire for any of that to change.

At the same time though, they are stridently rejecting the superwoman model of the previous generation. According to a 2007 Women, Rights & Equality survey published by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, young women felt the superwoman notion was "an unrealistic representation of a woman in today's society." The report went on to say: "It was thought this type of life was unsustainable and placed considerable

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pressure on women to constantly perform, and perform well, across myriad roles: mother, partner, daughter, friend, housekeeper and worker." Mark McCrindle adds: "I think the promises of recent years, that you can have it all, are not coming to pass for many. Everyone who's looked for it has said, 'Well, show me a real-life example of someone who's successfully doing it because I'm not aware of it.' So I think a greater sense of realism has come in for the next generation."

Perhaps the greatest reality check of all to hit generation superwoman and shape the priorities of today's young women is the inescapable finality of fertility. In 2002 ABC journalist Virginia Haussegger, a Generation Xer who had believed passionately in the superwoman model, wrote an article titled 'The sins of our feminist mothers', and later, a book called *Wonder Woman; The Myth of Having it All* (Allen and Unwin, 2005). After forging a successful career, she decided at 38 to start a family, but had left it too late. She was unable to become pregnant and was to remain childless.

In the article she wrote: "...while encouraging women in the '70s and '80s to reach for the sky, none of our purple-clad feminist mothers thought to tell us the truth about the biological clock. Our biological clock. The one that would eventually reach exploding point inside us... I am childless and I am angry. Angry that I was so foolish to take the word of my feminist mothers as gospel. Angry that I was daft enough to believe female fulfillment came with a leather briefcase."

Demographer and leading social commentator Bernard Salt says Virginia's article struck a chord. "It didn't necessarily start a shift in thinking, but aligned with a shift in thinking at that time, which was ready to mature anyway," he says.

According to Rebecca Huntley, director of IPSOS Mackay social trends study, and author of *The World According to Y* (Allen and Unwin, 2006), this greater understanding of declining fertility rates has made children the new glass ceiling for today's young women. "They think, 'If I choose to remain child-free and work really hard I can do whatever I want, rise

up in any industry, but the moment I decide to have a child that makes things fairly different and difficult, at least in the short term.' And I think one of the things young women have learned from older generations is, 'Well I can't delay having a child into my late thirties because it's just playing Russian roulette with mother nature.' So they don't want to follow the 1950s model of leaving school at 16, finding a husband and having a couple of kids before they're 20, but they also don't want the 'I'm going to think about all this when I'm in my mid-thirties.'"

Consequently, family is rising back up the ranks on young women's priority list. "There has definitely been a change," adds Mark, "and that's evident from the birth rate numbers (which were the lowest ever recorded in 2001 and now there's a virtual mini baby boom), through to the flattening of the delay of the median age of a woman having her first child and the median age of marriage."

But young women are not only putting

YOUNG WOMEN... WANT TO AVOID THE 'JUGGLE-STRUGGLE' OF THEIR MOTHERS' GENERATION.

a greater priority on having children, they also want to avoid the 'juggle-struggle' of their mothers' generation. "One of the big messages you get from young women," says Rebecca, "is when they look at their mothers or older women in the workplace who are frantically juggling kids, childcare, conference calls, husbands, and so on, they think that's quite a stressful way to be, and they think, 'maybe the best thing is that I choose one thing now and then concentrate on something else later'."

Mark says the figures support this thinking: "The growth in our research is not so much in women heading back to work when the little one is three months old; the growth is in women who are taking on that full-time parenting role until their children start formal childcare at about three, or even school age, so

there is this extending of that maternal role beyond just the early months."

That's not to say career is going completely by the wayside, as per the 1950s model. Rather, today's young women are becoming more strategic and flexible, and have even come to view the idea of a career in a new way. In an ongoing research program called Life-Patterns, following the changing lifestyle patterns of Generation X and Y, researchers found Generation Y views career as a personal journey rather than a position or pathway within an occupation or organisation that requires a linear progression to the top.

This view means a temporary absence from the workforce when children come along is not a death knoll for their career because variety of experience rather than a vertical rise to the top is seen as success. "I think young women have attained a good education and want to use it eventually," says Rebecca. "It may be: 'I'll get married in my twenties, have a couple of kids and when the kids are older I'll start my own internet business or do something where I'm self-employed or maybe go back part-time, or re-skill and try something else.' They're trying to work out how they can balance these things and prioritise one thing over another so they're not trying to do everything at the same time. I think we're going to see a much more flexible attitude. At a very general level they're quite strategic, so instead of striving for an ideal, they think, 'Well what do I want and how do I get it in stages?' That flexibility is key. It's not so much about being a superhero as being an everyday hero."

Bernard says another key difference to the 1950s model is the increasing equality in young women's relationships. While they may be happy to embrace full-time motherhood and all that involves, they don't expect to be doing it all alone. Rather than there being a sole breadwinner and a sole caregiver



(as per the 1950s model), or a sole breadwinner and the double role of caregiver and breadwinner (as per the superwoman model), the new model is more balanced. "I think young women would say, 'my life partner will be the primary breadwinner and I will be the secondary and support breadwinner, but I will be the primary caregiver and I damn well expect him to be the secondary or support caregiver,'" he says. "You could argue that what is now evolving is a true partnership; like that Yin and Yang symbol, and really that's the way it should work."

So while young women are embracing motherhood and marriage, they are in no rush to back-track the advances that have been made in terms of career, education, opportunity and equality. It's not so much that all they want to do is cook, bake and procreate, they have simply come to accept the reality of their womanhood by taking on board that to have children and to have a less stressful lifestyle requires choice, and with that choice comes certain compromises. "It's a return to traditional values, but with a 21st century ring to it," says Mark.

In the end it seems today's young women have finally reached a point where they feel they have the freedom to make the choices that suit them best. As Bernard says: "You've got a generation of women in their twenties saying, 'I don't feel disempowered; I don't feel limited because I'm a woman - I feel I can do anything. To the point where I can now choose traditional partnership if I wish. And I don't think that point had been reached in the '90s and '80s; certainly not in the '70s. If you were a woman who made those choices you were selling out; you were a gender traitor. I think it's only Y women who feel truly empowered to the point where they can choose to compete with men if they wish or they can choose to pursue more traditional paths, and they don't feel diminished with either choice. In actual fact, I think that's a wonderful position to be in - you are free to make a choice and not feel diminished regardless of the choice you make. That is true empowerment. That is true liberation." ■

Twenty-something women say...

I do want to achieve it all but think the notion of 'all' is very subjective. Once, it meant having a successful career and being the world's greatest mum all at the same time, but now I think it is more about achieving a balance. Ideally, I don't envisage working in the white collar nine-to-five world for much longer than 10 years and hope that by then I have built up enough confidence and contacts to branch out and start my own business or contract/consult so I have greater flexibility in what I do and how I spend my time. And this is all because I want to eventually be a fantastic partner and mum! While I think the domestic goddess notion is a bit over-hyped, I would personally be ready to hang up the suits in a few years to be a better mum and wife and be there for my family. However I do still believe in splitting the housework and would expect my husband to contribute, so it's not entirely traditional. I'd still love to work after I have children because I need the brain stimulation, but this would be more about me and not so much about money or climbing the career ladder. At the end of day, the success of being a great mum, raising great kids and contributing in a positive way to this world are the most important things to me!

Linh Nguyen, 25, marketing coordinator

I am happily engaged to my partner of six and a half years. Marriage is something that has always been at the forefront of my priorities. My mum and dad were married at 22 and have always demonstrated to me the importance of a happy marriage and traditional family values, so I suppose I always hoped my life would follow a similar pattern. I work as a primary school teacher and am loving my career more and more every year. Work is definitely the

primary focus of my life and if I was offered a promotion I would seriously consider it, even if it meant putting off having a family for a while. However, I specifically chose to pursue teaching, after originally studying to be a psychologist, as I felt it would be easier to juggle work and family when the time came. Having children is something I want to wait a little longer for though. I want to a) be married, b) have bought a house, and c) have had time to pursue my career enough that I am ready to take a break. I can't see this happening for at least three to four years. When I have kids I'd like to be financially stable enough for us to live on one income so I can be a stay-at-home mum. Depending on our financial circumstances I am open to going back to work part-time - say two days per week - and once all of my children are school age I'll definitely return to teaching full-time and hope to pursue my career into higher leadership roles. Having children in the next five or so years will make me around 30 when I start my family. In some circles I mix with this seems perfectly normal. Admittedly, it does concern me when my friends who already have babies speak about the increased risks of complications the older you get and the less your body will go back to its previous size after pregnancy. I always thought these were factors expectant mothers in their forties had to consider, but apparently once you hit 30 it all kicks in. These would be some of the things that every now and again make me think maybe I should start a family sooner.

Rachele Domenici, 25, teacher

