

Superwoman

Superwoman was born in 1975, and is now to be seen stalking our screens as the woman of the She commercial who successfully juggles all of her lives. Fifteen years on, Shirley Conran has realised rather belatedly that she has, Frankenstein-like, created a monster and this month has set out to demolish the myth by declaring *Down With Superwoman*. If the 'traditional woman' may have suffered from depression, her new assertive sister is by now more likely to have developed stress and exhaustion.

A combination of Mrs Beeton, *Enquire Within Upon*

in those pre-filofax days, promised lifestyle organisation and efficient time-management. Being a Superwoman was about 'being with your family as opposed to servicing them'. Conran advised, with enviable energy, on how to spend your efficiently garnered leisure-time (calculated at 72 hours a week).

Superwoman Two was full of up-beat tips on 'How To Start Your Own Business' or 'How To Enjoy Being In Bed'. What made all this activity possible was that Superwoman could help herself to 'some of the terrific welfare state free-money benefits and the services that you are entitled to and for which you pay taxes.'

Superwoman in the 70s could rely upon a relatively intact National Health Service, a range of educational possibilities and a system of benefits. Working the Conran-estimated 40-hour week, collecting her children from the creche, Superwoman might conceivably have found the time to spare from stripping pine furniture to learn Serbo-Croat or philately. Sadly no more, Superwoman Mark Three is firmly back in place servicing her family efficiently.

As working hours for both sexes creep up, the language and techniques of time-management are more frequently to be found applied to profitability and commerce than to having fun. Superwoman nowadays has to do an awful lot of campaigning to keep her creche open, to get those workplace nurseries in operation, and to keep her evening class viable.

The efficient management of the past decade has ensured that 'fun' no longer comes cheap. Museums and art galleries could be described in 1977 as 'warm and wonderful places'; in 1990 if they are still warm, they're no longer free.

Down With Superwoman is ominously silent about the changes that have been



Shirley Conran: 'Down with Superwoman'

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Everything, the lifestyle features of the Sunday colour supplements and glossy women's magazines, the original Superwoman, who aspired to being 'the one and only star of her own life', was to be found in any kitchen which also boasted a set of Habitat mugs and saucepans.

In 1990, the aubergine and artichoke may no longer be the province of the enlightened middle classes, but the woman of the Conran ideal home is likely to have discovered that 10 years of Thatcherite consumption mean that the accessories of the 'lifestyle' home come rather more expensive now. The Conran Superwoman of the 90s is likely to be found power-dressed in the style of Conran junior (Jasper), to be lounging (in her carefully-calculated leisure hours) on a Conran (Terence) sofa, and to have a copy of *Lace* (Shirley) secreted somewhere.

In 1977, Superwoman entered into her second incarnation, with the publication of *Superwoman Two* and the *Superwoman Yearbook* which,

wrought over the last decade, and the promises made to *Superwoman Two*. The lists of degree courses, adult education classes and training programmes have inexplicably vanished. Those 'services you're entitled to' are no longer available; Samuel Smiles has finally overtaken the breezy optimism of the post-feminist journalist.

Superwoman now has to cope with the requirements of 'Running A Home' when public support for private life has all but collapsed, and the family is a site in which superhuman resources really are required. And despite the new title, it is still the woman who has to supply them. Superwoman considers men to be generally so feeble at household tasks that it's simpler to undertake them herself.

For all that, Conran does have all the expectations and demands of a woman who brought up her own family in the more sympathetic 60s. *Down With Superwoman* is actually refreshingly liberal

in the context of the impossible demands of post-feminist 'lifestyle'. There are nods at greenery, as might be expected from the author of one of the first ecologically-sound blockbusters, *Savages*. Conran is rigorously unsentimental too about the physical and emotional demands of motherhood, in no way a subscriber to the new-age ideal of accessorised children.

Superwoman remains, however, unrepentantly middle class. She organises private coaching for her children, she knows that 'the best perfumes are French', and she converts her Georgian terrace house (*so much easier, we are told, than Victorian*).

There's still a relentless insistence that with sufficient list-making (there's a customised stress-management chart) and organisation, the life of a Superwoman can be achieved. But for Superwoman today - Conran does have a point - life is still too short to stuff a mushroom.

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