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OBSERVATIONS ON TRENDS IN MOTHERHOOD

I feel sorry for the advertising agencies that must produce the 30- and 60-second commercial spots costing hundreds of thousands of dollars on primetime television. They have the task of making their product irresistible to a market they don't understand.

Women do most of the buying of consumer goods, so the sales pitch must appeal to women. But how do you create a commercial spot featuring a woman without alienating some of the women you would like as customers?

Highly-paid ad men are discovering what Walter Mondale didn't seem to know when he put Geraldine Ferraro on the ticket. Women are simply not a bloc with the same attitudes (commercial or political) who can be appealed to as a group.

The feminist movement has carried on a running criticism for the last decade against advertisements that show mothers taking pride in clean households, good cooking, and other evidences of a homemaker's domestic skills. In the feminist view, women should be liberated from the "stereotype" that homemaking is a fulfilling career for a woman.

Yet marketing research shows that mothers constitute 60% of the primetime audience and so they are the target of 75% of primetime advertising dollars. The percentages are even higher during daytime TV.

A 1978 Enjoli perfume TV spot showed a mother saying to her husband, "I can bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan and never, never, never let you forget you're a man." In 1984, the Enjoli woman has changed her tune, saying, "I can bring home the the bacon, fry it up in a pan, but once in a while you've got to give me a hand."

The Wall Street Journal calls this change "Madison Avenue trying to keep up with motherhood." But is Enjoli selling perfume or changing lifestyles and women's lib? It seems obvious that the smell of frying bacon would smother the delicate fragrance of perfume no matter what were the words in the woman's mouth.

Some advertisers have succumbed to feminist demands by domesticizing Dad. Dads now cook Aunt Jemima's waffles, change diapers with Johnson & Johnson baby powder, and go

supermarket shopping for Kraft cheese.

Is this the way life is, or the way the avant garde wants it to be? Such advertising may be raising false hopes in career-oriented young women.

In my fall tour of college campuses, quite a few female students asked, "Why can't the husband stay home and take care of the baby while the wife pursues her career?" I replied that these women don't have to get my permission for such an arrangement; all they need is to find a man who wants to be a househusband; and my observation of the real world is that such men are a small minority.

Many advertising agencies are coping with conflicting social trends by censoring mothers out of their commercials altogether. A survey of 250 recent TV spots found that only nine showed women as mothers. A large percentage didn't show women at all, using men or only the products themselves.

Recent commercials show a significant increase in commercials that use employed women to peddle a product. United Airlines shows a mother looking at a family picture in her briefcase while on a business trip, while Pour-A-Quiche shows mother and dad driving home together from their jobs.

Statistics show that 53% of women are employed outside the home and 47% are not. If companies want to sell their products, they can't afford to omit advertising empathy for nearly half of the market just for the sake of being trendy. So mothers still exist in TV commercials and probably always will.

The artificial world of primetime TV programming, by contrast, seems to have abandoned the traditional family and plunged into a world where there are almost no mothers. June Cleaver, Harriet Nelson, Lucy Ricardo, and other stay-at-home moms have vanished.

They've been replaced by single women, divorced women sharing homes, and female detectives with unemployed husbands. Some mothers appear, but they are usually widowed, divorced, unwed, or their children are peripheral to the plot.

In the real world, however, the tide is going against feminism and toward motherhood. Career women in their thirties are deciding they want to be stay-at-home moms after all and are complaining about the wimpiness of the men they know.