Once a mom always a mom

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In the hit movie, "The Devil Wears Prada," Meryl Streep plays a ferocious fashion editor who mashes underlings of both sexes under her stylish stiletto heels. And many reviewers have praised her character as all too recognizable.

This typical comment appeared in The Observer of London: "I'd rather eat my own opaque tights than have to admit this, but all my worst bosses have been women. God knows some of the men have had their flaws too, but the relationships have been less intense somehow. I don't think men are any less moody or any more talented; it's just that they don't tend to engage with women in the same hothouse way ..."

This anonymous but obviously female writer is backed up by a recent poll for Lifetime Women's Pulse. About 45 percent of the women surveyed preferred a male boss, with about 30 percent opting for a supervisor of their own gender.

Well, we want to register a strong dissent. Over the last 40 years, we've served under many managers of both sexes, and most of our best bosses have been women.

One reason is revealed in a study discussed recently at the American Sociological Association. Women earn about 81 cents for every dollar earned by men, but that goes up to 91 cents when women are senior managers. "If women break through the glass ceiling, it helps other women," said professor Philip N. Cohen, the study's co-author.

The Old Girls' Network is real. When women attain clout in the workplace they can use that influence to help other women - just the way male bosses have always helped their buddies.

The more important issue is one of style and priorities. With 3-out-of-5 working-age women now employed (up from 2-in-5 in 1967), the single biggest problem facing many young parents is balancing the demands of work and family. And in our experience, women managers are often quicker to recognize that problem and more sensitive in helping their employees handle it.

One example: ABC staffers received an e-mail from a female manager. With school about to start, said the message, we think you should take your child on the first day, so talk to your supervisor about arranging time off. When Cokie thanked the manager for her policy, she got this reply: "Once a Mom always a Mom."

How refreshing. When our kids were small, we had to sneak out of work to attend a parent-teacher conference or a Halloween parade.

Our daughter, the mother of three young boys, now works for a woman with two small kids of her own. Between the two of them, there's a level of understanding and sympathy that's especially helpful when a child falls sick or a babysitter falls through. It's hard to imagine quite that same bond with a male boss, no matter how family-friendly he'd like to be.

Young fathers can also benefit from the "once a Mom always a Mom" syndrome. A few years ago one of Steve's colleagues at George Washington University was faced with an emergency: his wife took sick and he rushed to meet her at the hospital. The female department head (mother of a teenager) instantly organized babysitters for the kids left at home. Would a man have reacted in the same way?

Then there's the issue of workplace culture. Despite Meryl Streep's sharp-clawed character, women tend to have a softer management style than men, more collegial and less hierarchical, more nurturing and less dictatorial. Says our daughter: "Women deliver criticism in a language that's non-threatening to other women."

Moreover, she adds, women managers have "less tangible measures of success" than men. They're far less likely to grade an employee's worth by the macho metric of working crazy hours and ignoring outside distractions, like a spouse and kids.

During the Aspen Ideas Festival earlier this summer, this issue of female leadership styles dominated a session Cokie was moderating. The panelists all expressed the same fear: that their strength as managers would be seen as a "weakness" by hard-charging male peers.

That fear has to change. The American economy needs the women who are now pouring into graduate schools, but often find it difficult to keep working once they have children. A key answer to this female brain drain is family-friendly workplaces, and one of the best ways to achieve that goal is more managers who live by the creed, "Once a Mom, always a Mom."