

# Diapers, Laundry and a Legal Practice

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The Pew Research Center released data earlier this month confirming what most mothers already knew: Working moms spend twice as many hours as working fathers caring for children and performing household work. No surprise, then, that the same survey revealed these working moms also are more likely to feel exhausted both at work and at home.

At the same time, the National Association for Law Placement reports that 87 percent of law firm partners are supported by a stay-at-home spouse. Yes, you read that right. The legal profession is disproportionately populated by a Leave It To Beaver household model not found for some decades in any other sector of American life.

Couple that with the fact that at the largest 200 law firms in the country, women equity partners are paid 89 percent of what men make (controlling for hours billed and business originated), according to the National Association of Women Lawyers.

The upshot? Women lawyers with children are swimming upstream, pulling a cement block of gender bias behind them.

Working moms — paid less than their male counterparts, less likely to be given challenging assignments or credit for achievement, rarely receiving the kind of mentorship and sponsorship their male counterparts routinely benefit from, and pulling laundry duty when they do get home — are often hard-pressed to justify continuing to pursue leadership roles at the office.

So they vote with their feet and leave firms and law departments in search of "balance."

Aware of that scenario, I did everything I thought I was supposed to do to set myself up for success as a working mom. As a young woman navigating the legal profession, I have benefited from the guidance and mentorship of a number of fabulous senior female attorneys. And all of them said the same thing: Make sure you have reliable childcare! The message was consistent — and it taught me to circumvent, rather than challenge, the traditional allocation of domestic gender norms.

So before I started a family, I made sure we had comprehensive childcare set up for when I went back to work.

But no one volunteers advice about how to find gender parity at home. Bar associations, law firm initiatives and advocacy groups like the Center for Women in Law and Ms. JD have focused their attention on bias elimination in law firms. Less attention has been focused on eliminating bias at home. But the need for guidance is just as critical.

As evidenced by the Pew Research data, and as experienced in dual-earner households every day, at home, as in the workplace, working mothers find the forces of ingrained gender bias inescapable — and it's crippling their ability to enjoy, much less sustain, "having it all."

When you ask advice about gender parity at home, the response generally follows the stock answer that U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg has frequently given: Marry a man who values your career as much as you do.

Heteronormative problems aside, this answer doesn't actually provide any meaningful way for women to address the pressures both they and their spouses will likely experience to pursue their careers and successfully raise children. For all the toolkits, best practices and women's initiatives, there's really no playbook out there for working moms trying to navigate the impulses and assumptions that lead to an unequal division of responsibilities at home.

It's not enough to know you should start your family with someone who values your career. I knew it. I married such a person. And yet there I was, two months ago, home from the hospital with a newborn, assuming total responsibility for his care.

How did I, fighter of implicit bias, advocate for women's advancement, get here? I'm here because I value my partner's career too. And by a twist of fate, he had a case set for trial in September, one month after I was due to deliver our son. So then what? Does he abandon the case he's been running for four years to be home that first month? No, I said: "Of course not!" And just like that, I chose to be home, barefoot in the kitchen, a baby on my hip, with dad at the office.

Now, this isn't permanent. My husband's case will end. And we will both share the workload at home again. But there are sure to be other cases. And we will both be working in a profession that assumes stay-at-home support we won't have. Even our premium childcare won't bridge that gap. So then we'll be trying to figure out how to "have it all," equitably.

If this first test was any indication, my tendency will be to take on more of the work at home, just like a majority of those Pew Research survey respondents. And if I'm not careful, I, too, will end up exhausted, unable to enjoy my work at home or in the office, and tragically motivated to give up my professional aspirations.

They say acknowledging the problem is the first step. OK, I've identified the gender bias. The next step is...to take a nap.

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