

The Challenges That Working Mothers Still Face

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Nearly 30 years ago, it may have looked to others like I had it all—a thriving career I loved and two small children. Yet I still found myself lying awake at night worrying that I was falling short, both at work and at home.

Discouraged by five-figure child-care costs and the difficulty of setting boundaries on my work hours, I quit two newspaper jobs I loved in rapid succession. I was a bureau chief, then a part-time reporter. And then I was neither.

I created the Work & Family column for the Journal soon thereafter in hopes of shedding light on the problems of working mothers and finding solutions. More than 1,000 columns later, some of the problems have eased, but others still loom, and new obstacles have emerged. On the eve of my retirement, I decided to take one last look at all that's changed, and, sadly, all that hasn't.

When I started my column in 1991, the share of married mothers holding paid jobs outside the home had reached 71%, up from 42% at the end of the 1960s. Many were hitting a brick wall. Managers trained in the Reagan era, almost all of them men, had little patience for the stresses that mothers faced. Some women were so worried they'd be penalized at work for caring about their kids that they hid family photos at the office. Any suggestion that working fathers might want paternity leave drew disdainful laughter.

Beth Makens Long, a utility-industry salesperson whom I profiled in my column in 1996, labored long and hard to earn her male colleagues' respect. She wore the dark, boxy suits with skirts and heels that were de rigueur for working women at the time—even on days the men showed up in golf shirts.

Her bosses didn't want to hear about her issues at home. "I could never say I wanted to see my child's first-grade play. I had to say, 'I'm sorry, I have another meeting,'" said Ms. Long, of Orland Park, Ill., in a recent interview. When mandatory meetings were held on school holidays, such as the Friday after Thanksgiving, "You just kept your mouth shut," she says. "You worked so hard just to gain respect."

Weary of the conflicts, Ms. Long did what many baby-boom mothers did: She left corporate life to start her own business. Working with her husband, John Long, a former utility industry executive, she made more money as an entrepreneur and gained control over her workload and her time, scheduling meetings around her family's needs.

Now 59, Ms. Long is satisfied with the decisions she made. Her three children, 27, 25 and 21, are doing well. To her, the acceptance that some mothers enjoy at work today is remarkable. "Young

women today name it. They say, ‘Hey, it’s my kid’s school play and I have to leave,’” she says. “This new generation has changed everything.”

Mothers in the millennial generation are more likely to be open about their needs and to receive a respectful response, especially in fields employing lots of women. And they no longer feel compelled to dress like men. (Thank God.) Colorful dresses and stylish separates replaced those boxy suits.

Brenna Fitzgerald, a 36-year-old mother of two sons, ages 4½ and 22 months, asked before returning from her first maternity leave to work from home one day a week, and received immediate approval from her boss at the Boston ad agency where she works, Allen & Gerritsen. She was promoted to vice president when she was eight months pregnant with her first child and to senior vice president after her second maternity leave.

Like many millennials, Ms. Fitzgerald is closer to her parents than past generations, helping her to build a better support network than many mothers had in the past. Her parents live nearby and help out when she has to work late. And at home, her 38-year-old husband, Patrick Dooling, founder and managing partner of a Boston real-estate investment firm, carries half the load. He takes the boys to daycare most mornings. After work, Ms. Fitzgerald picks them up and gives them baths while he cooks dinner for the family.

Millennial men and women are sharing housework more evenly. Men do an equal or larger share of the dishes in nearly 44% of couples and an equal or larger share of laundry in 31% of couples, about twice the percentages of the early 1990s, according to a 2018 study. This is easing the second shift of chores that exhausted many boomer women. Men also are picking up more child-care tasks.

A tight labor market is fueling an increase in benefits for new mothers, such as lactation consulting services. Nearly seven of 10 employers allow employees to work from home at least some of the time, according to the Society for Human Resource Management, a professional group.

More employers see financial benefits in leveling the playing field for working mothers. A growing body of research, including a recent study by the ratings and research firm S&P Global, links the presence of women in top management to better financial results.

More employers are also offering a benefit that was unthinkable in the past—paid paternity leave. Time off with their infants makes a huge difference for men. Andrew Grinc took three weeks off at home with his wife, Madelyn, after the 2018 birth of their daughter Hannah, and then another nine weeks later after his wife returned to work. “It had a lasting impact on my parenting skills,” says Mr. Grinc, a communications manager in Silver Spring, Md., for Discovery Inc. It also helped he and his wife build trust and confidence in each other, he says.

Work-family remedies aren’t really remedies unless they reach a larger proportion of working parents. While access to paid family leave is growing, only about 16% of private-sector workers in the U.S. have it.

“There’s a lot of work left to do,” says Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s COO and author of “Lean In,” an influential 2013 best seller exhorting women to seek more challenges and take more risks at work. “We still need to make work work for parents, and it needs to be reframed as an issue that’s not just for mothers but for fathers.” In addition to the lack of broad paid-leave policies, Ms. Sandberg cites what she sees as structural obstacles that are holding women back, including low minimum-wage laws, rising child-care costs and the gender pay gap.

In a sign of how fraught these issues have become, Ms. Sandberg admitted in a 2016 blog post, after the tragic 2015 death of her husband Dave Goldberg, that “Lean In” failed to adequately cover the difficulties that women face—especially women without her own advantages—when they have an unsupportive partner or no partner at all. “I did not really get how hard it is to succeed at work when you are overwhelmed at home,” wrote Ms. Sandberg, who chairs a family foundation bearing her and her late husband’s names.

The soaring cost of quality childcare rivals many families’ outlays for housing. Average child-care center prices have risen 26% for 4-year-olds and 29% for infants since 2009, according to Child Care Aware, a research, referral and advocacy organization.

Mothers work less in states where child-care costs are highest and school days are short, according to a 2019 study of time-use data on 37,993 mothers. While the data shows a correlation rather than a cause-and-effect link, it offers evidence that mothers’ decisions are influenced by the challenges of managing preschool and after-school care. The problem is especially acute for households headed by single mothers, which have more than doubled since 1970.

Subtler economic and cultural forces are also at play. Having the flexibility to choose when to work your required hours is the benefit most prized by 28% of U.S. workers—more than paid family leave or working from home, the Pew Research Center says.

But the 24/7 economy, pervasive communication technology and pressure to collaborate across time zones are robbing parents of control over their time. Job creep—the tendency of work to seep into every waking moment—means that few jobs can be done from 9 to 5 anymore, accelerating a tsunami of work.

Experiments aimed at putting boundaries around work are largely dead. U.S. Cellular, a Chicago-based wireless carrier, has ended the “no email Fridays” policy it established several years ago. “With the speed of innovation in our industry, it isn’t realistic to take a day completely away from email,” COO Jay Ellison said in a statement.

The culture of long hours in some male-dominated industries is another powerful counterforce. Campus recruiters for tech companies tout such perks as free meals, haircuts and on-site chiropractors, enabling employees to avoid leaving the office, according to a 2018 Stanford University study of 84 companies’ presentations. Recruiters boast about employees having all-night hackathons and forgetting to sleep because they were having too much fun—a climate that working parents might find more chilling than charming, the Stanford researchers say.

Parents are also putting more pressure on themselves at home. Growing income inequality, job-market flux and fears of losing jobs to automation and AI are fueling anxiety about whether their children will succeed in the future, says Fabrizio Zilibotti, a Yale University economist and co-author with Northwestern University's Matthias Doepke of "Love, Money and Parenting," a book on how economic trends shape parenting. Many parents now engage in ceaseless, sometimes intrusive monitoring of their children's academic progress. They are spending 3.5 times more hours helping children with homework than they did in the 1970s, Dr. Zilibotti says. Such escalating pressures risk choking out spontaneous play and damaging the quality of the family time that parents have fought so hard to protect.

One of the many things I've learned on this beat is that it's all too easy to underestimate the resourcefulness of families. Given the tools, parents can cobble together some remarkable fixes for work-family conflict.

Stephanie and Mike Bursek worked back-to-back shifts for 11 years starting in the mid-1990s, so that they could care for their two children themselves rather than relying on day care. Stephanie worked part time for a Seattle retailer so she could leave at 2 p.m., enabling Mike to get to his 3 p.m. shift at a printing plant. The setup slowed Stephanie's career, forcing them to budget carefully, and led to years of sleep deprivation for Mike.

The Burseks, who have since moved to Shawnee, Kan., have no regrets. "Any sacrifices we made were for our children to have the best life they could possibly have, and it has paid off," says Stephanie, who is 55. Their son Spencer, 26, is working as a biologist, and their daughter Audrey, 23, is a senior at Northern Arizona University.

Audrey says that she's proud of her parents. "They set a good example of team-oriented co-parenting," she says. But fewer companies today offer the kind of control over work hours that Ms. Bursek had. Part-time salaried jobs with benefits are scarce in most industries, and the gig economy, with its low pay and lack of benefits, is a poor substitute.

Audrey isn't sure she'll be able to follow a path similar to her parents. She loves children and worked as a nanny and child-care aide for several years in her teens, but raising children has become more costly, she says. Her generation is already burdened by student-loan debt, wages haven't kept up with living costs, and "job security isn't what it was in the past," she says. "It's difficult sometimes to see a future."

One lesson has become clear in the three generations since a majority of married mothers entered the paid labor force: The solutions that your own parents used probably won't work for you. Economic forces will almost certainly eclipse them. Either the way that jobs are structured or scheduled will change, or a recession will come along and crush all your best-laid plans, as happened to many young parents.

Still, it's clear that most working parents are better off than they were in the past. My three Gen X stepchildren and two millennial children have all worked hard to build careers, and the three who have children have received more support from their employers than past generations. Smart

employers have learned to truly value women in the workplace for the diversity and insight they bring, lending support to working mothers.

Significant changes are taking root in American homes too, thanks to the more egalitarian attitudes of the millennial generation. I see working parents today doing a better job than I did of planning for anticipated work-family conflicts. And as men take a bigger role in child-rearing and housework, they're gaining insights that will make them better executives when they move into the C-suites of the future.

With luck, my grandchildren will come of age in a workplace where benefits are broader and more finely tuned to families' needs than ever before.