

# PROFILE

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## Finding the Balance

**P**OV: *It's pre-COVID January 2020. My husband and I have been happily married for a couple of years and want to start a family. The problem? I am a practicing attorney! How do I balance being a mom and also being an attorney in practice? Should I start looking for a new job outside of practice?*

Many women, including myself, find themselves having to face the giant wall that rises in the middle of their career: the maternal wall. The maternal wall is a reality, and having children has proven to be detrimental to a woman's continued career as a practicing attorney. Research has indicated that, in South Africa, women constitute 57% of new entrants admitted into the legal profession, but only 47% are practicing, and 28% are partners, in comparison to their male counterparts, who constitute 72% of partners.

Fast-forward 4+ years later... I have two beautiful children, and I am still in practice. Have I sacrificed my career to become a mom? No! Have I sacrificed motherhood for my career? No! So, what's the secret to finding the balance between being a practicing attorney and a mom? There is no magic formula; however, we are seeing more "tools" being made available to working moms, to help create some balance between having a career and being a mom.

**Remote/ hybrid working arrangements and flexible working hours:** The COVID-19 pandemic came with many pitfalls and negative consequences. However, one of the few silver linings that it brought about was the shift in workforce arrangements. A new "industrial revolution", if you will, which showed us the possibilities of remote working and flexible working arrangements. This, in particular, has

made it easier for "working moms" to have a bit more flexibility and balance. As we move away from the traditional working model of being in the office from 8am to 5pm, 5 days a week, it has now become acceptable to work from home (or anywhere, really, that has an internet connection!) and on flexible hours (including those sweet, quiet hours in the morning before the house wakes up, or an hour or two in the evening once the kids are in bed). This gives us a greater ability to fit in time during the day to fetch kids from school or to work from home when we have a sick child at home.

**Alternative career roles:** Traditionally, the goal in an attorney's career is to achieve partnership status. However, we are seeing more and more law firms moving away from the traditional hierarchical career paths, creating more "alternative career roles" in practice (for example, becoming counsel or a professional support lawyer). The introduction of these alternative career paths is an incredibly progressive step, and a great tool for people who want to stay in a law firm and practice, but not necessarily work their way up to becoming a partner (which is not to say that they cannot become a partner at a later stage in their career).

**Reduced working hours:** Legal practice still largely subscribes to "the billable hour". As such, one of the biggest tools that can help create some balance in one's working life is having a reduced working hours arrangement (and, accordingly, a reduced budget). For example, instead of needing to work eight billable hours a day, only having to work five billable hours a day, and having your budget pro-rated to these hours. This gives parents a few extra hours in a day to attend to other family commitments (like the school drop-

off or collection, taking a sick child to the doctor, or attending a dance recital) without the pressure and guilt of not writing fees during that time.

**Client management and expectations:** The legal profession is a service profession, and the role of clients and fulfilling their demands are central to the practice of law. Attorneys are generally under pressure to avail themselves to their clients, as and when demanded. In this regard, I have found that managing clients' expectations is key. That it not to say that you need to broadcast your personal working arrangement to your clients, but rather to manage their expectations on your time and availability to attend to instructions (for example, accepting an instruction at 3 o'clock in the afternoon and advising the client that you will attend to it first thing the following morning).

**Support for the home:** Realistically, most of us need additional support on the home-front to be able to continue to have a career, whether it is an au pair to assist us with the kids during "core" working hours or grandparents to help with school pick-ups. The old adage that "it takes a village" rings true!

**Support from work:** At the end of the day, most of these tools are ineffective without the support of the firm you are working for, and the team that you work with. We are seeing more and more firm policies put in place which support the "working mom", which is a step in the right direction.

While there is still a long way to go before there is true equality for the working mom, we can appreciate that we have come a long way in creating ways to regulate the "work / mom / life balance". 🙌