Let’s Walk Into a Typical Day as a Working Mom

The alarm goes off at 4:30 a.m. in Minnesota. Melinda Pearson, a union organizer and mother of a 12-year-old, starts her day in darkness, heading to a 5 a.m. workout. At the same time, in another state, Claire Immega, a director at a law firm and mother of two, carves out precious personal time before her household awakens.

“The problem with your timeline is that often my day is very… permeable,” Immega said. “A lot of times, all the time, I’m multitasking. So I would be, like, sending parenting [messages], or doing my makeup and on a call.”

Two working mothers, two different careers, both shaped by the demands of parenting. Even with supportive husbands, both say they are the “default parent,” responsible for emergencies and daily decisions. Their personal time comes in fleeting moments, found between the pull of work and home.

In the United States, more than 26 million mothers work outside the home. About 82 percent of mothers with children under 18 are in the labor force, according to 2023 U.S. Census Bureau data.

After returning from maternity leave, Immega stepped away from her litigation partner role and became a law firm executive. “I found trial work with children to be really hard for me... I felt like I found it really hard when I was immersed at work to be present with my kids when I got home.” She accepted the trade-off: “I will not make the kind of money I could have made, but I felt like the devil’s bargain… I just didn’t want to do anymore. I wanted to be able to be present for my family.”

Pearson went the opposite direction. “I actually became a little more driven in my career after becoming a parent, because I really wanted to make sure I was raising a son who had a strong woman, a fresh woman as a mother.”

When asked who handles childcare emergencies during work hours, Immega answers simply: “Me.” Pearson points to the gendered expectations behind that. “Nobody looks at my husband the same way they look at me… No one asks him, ‘How do you feel about being away from your son so much?’”

“It is very hard to work like you don’t have a child and then a parent like you don’t work,” Pearson said. “Those are sort of the expectations, particularly for American moms.” Immega adds, “The biggest professional challenge is… not having the same scope and freedom to pour myself into work. There’s so little flexibility in my personal responsibilities that work can’t grow very much… I can’t give a lot more than I do to work easily.”

The financial pressure is constant. “We were paying $14,000 a year for daycare back in 2014,” Pearson said. “We couldn’t afford daycare for more than one kid at a time.” Now, her son’s drum lessons cost $400 a month, plus the $2,500 drum set. From housing choices to grocery bills, both women said children affect nearly every financial decision.

To cope, they have developed personal strategies. Immega uses dinner prep as a reset. “For me, like it’s a time my kids watch TV before dinner. I cook, and it’s this time for myself where I can just… relax a little bit after work.” She also relies on outside help. “We outsource a number of things — gardening, a lot of healthcare — and that makes a huge difference. I would be really stretched very, very thin” without it.

“I am more work mom as a general rule… most of my stuff is task oriented,” Pearson said. “I am not a super fun mom. Like, everything has to be tasky, right?”