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SPECIAL REPORT

# WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

- Work-life balance
- Profiles of Lebanese working mothers
- Rethinking social gender roles

By Nabila Rahhal

# CAUGHT BETWEEN HOME AND THE OFFICE

Challenges and the way forward for Lebanese working moms

**A typical week-day in the life of a woman with a career and children looks something like this:** She gets out of bed at 6 a.m. to get her children ready for their day, then goes to work for at least nine hours (often working through her lunch break) before picking up her children from daycare or their grandparents and being fully engaged with them and their needs until they sleep at 8 p.m. She then spends the remaining few hours before going to bed either catching up on small household chores or work, spending some quality time with her husband, or doing things that interest her—and the next day she gets up to repeat it all again.

Although working women share the economic responsibilities of the household with their partners—or as single working moms, or with a partner who is unable or unwilling to contribute, take on the responsibility alone—societal norms still dictate they are the main caregivers of their children and the ones in charge of household affairs.

According to the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report 2018, women tend to perform the majority of unpaid tasks—defined by the report as mainly housework and household care. In 29 of the 149 countries included in the report, women spend twice as much time on such activities than men. In Lebanon, a 2018 qualitative assessment conducted by the World Bank revealed that 70 percent of those surveyed said that the wife was responsible for domestic duties.

While the birth of a child is a joyous moment in a woman's life, for women who work, it also comes with the worry of how to manage everything once their brief maternity leave ends.

## RETURN ON INVESTMENT

This dual role that women play once they become mothers has restricted their ability to build and sustain a career. Although more women are acquiring a university education than in previous decades—a 2013 report published by the Collective for Research and Training on Development-Action (CRTD.A) indicates that roughly 51 percent of university graduates in Lebanon are women—not all of them are utilizing this degree to get a job. The same report admits there is little national information on the participation of Lebanese women in the formal economy but says that various studies place it between 21 percent—which is the average for the Arab world—and 27 percent. Moreover, the report indicates that women are most likely to drop out of the labor force at childbearing years and beyond.

According to the World Bank survey, one of the major challenges for Lebanese women to enter and remain in the labor market is their home responsibilities, which include taking care of children and elderly relatives. The other challenge is societal pressure exhibited in the attitude of the community toward working mothers, and the mentality that a woman's place is at home with her children. "We hear this time and again that there is pressure [on women] to be at home and take care of the children, and it is the man's responsibility to be the breadwinner," says Frida Khan, gender specialist at the International Labor Organization. "Definitely, there is pressure for this, and I've seen a lot of research, generally from the region, talking about cultural issues being a restraint in women's participation in the workforce, especially after having children."

Both these challenges are clearly at work among the women EXECUTIVE talked to in this report. Some of the Syrian women working at Anamel, an NGO that works with Syrian refugees, told EXECUTIVE that they are only working because they need to support their family and would stop doing so if they were financially secure; in their perspective, their main role is to be at home with their children (see article page 62). One of the Lebanese women EXECUTIVE profiled, meanwhile, says her mother still criticizes her for not giving enough time to her children because of her work (see profiles article page 54).

If taken from the perspective of the investment in education versus the outcome in productivity, then the economy suffers because there are not enough educated women in the workforce. "The economy needs women's contributions, since half of the population and the majority of university grads are women," says Nada Genadry, human resources director at Liban Post. "It would be a pity to have so much payment done on educating women for no return to the economy in comparison with the investment."

## WOMEN ON TOP

Childcare responsibilities are also one of the obstacles in the way of women reaching senior positions. The WEF's Gender Gap reports that only 34 percent of global managers are women. Lebanon is one of five countries worldwide where the gender gap for managerial positions is at 90 percent.

While there are several factors at play for this, the responsibility of childcare being placed largely on women is a major factor. Speaking from her own research on the topic and from her experience as a working mother, Eveline Hitti, chairperson of the department of emergency medicine and deputy chief medical officer at American University of Beirut Medical Center (AUBMC), says that we need to change the way we look at childcare if we want women to grow in their careers. "After my experience, it became very clear: You can fix so much, but at the end of the day, if a woman is drowning between work at home and work at work, something has to give. This concept that we [women] are superheroes that can take 40 hours work weeks and

Lebanon is one of five countries worldwide where the gender gap for managerial positions is at 90 percent.

put the same time at home is not going to work for anybody," Hitti says. "I am not belittling the obstacles at work and glass ceilings and all that—there is still more that organizations do [in that regard]—but I think that even if you fix all this stuff but don't change the way you look at childcare, and you don't see it as a shared responsibility between the parents and not just the job of one person, namely the mother, I don't think we will ever be able to close that gap."

Genadry believes that it is the private sector and corporations that can jumpstart this mindset of childcare as a shared responsibility. "The theme of working women should be enlarged," Genadry says. "It is time for us in Lebanon to think about educating men and women to share household chores, and I think we should rely on companies to do that. Even women need to be educated because they have difficulty delegating what they do, thinking that it is their responsibility, while in fact it is parenting."

In January 2018, Lebanese labor law allowed for a three-day paternity leave, a move which the ILO's Khan sees as positive—despite the absurdly short length of the leave—because it kick starts the conversation regarding the role of fathers in parenting.

## THE SHORT LEAVE

For the time being, parenting is still viewed as mainly the mother's domain and so, if women are to be active contributors to the economy after childbirth, then they need support to do so. This support often starts with maternity leave which, in Lebanon, was extended to 70 days in April 2014. Khan says that while the extension is commendable, it still falls short of the 14-week leave that is recommended by the ILO convention. All of the companies Executive spoke to for this article agree that the maternity leave in Lebanon is too short. "I believe that maternity leave should be 90 days," says Yara el-Ali, head of human resources at ABC. "Because if you take the normal evolution of babies, at three months old they would be more developed and could then be left at a nursery or with their parents."

What Khan says is lacking from the Lebanese labor law, but found in the laws of neighboring countries, such as Jordan or Syria, is a woman's right for an unpaid leave following her maternity leave—without the risk of losing her job. While this is not part of the law in Lebanon, some companies Executive spoke to say they do make exceptions if needed. "Maternity leave is 70 days, but if a mother wants to take more days, we give her the choice of unpaid leave," Nayiri Manoukian, head of human resources at Bank Audi, says.

## THE BIG DILEMMA

One of the main thoughts on a woman's mind while she is on her maternity leave is what to do in terms of childcare once she goes back to work. While in Lebanon reliance on family members, especially the child's grandmother, for childcare is common—all the mothers Executive spoke to say this is what they did (see article page 54)—this is not always an option. "The first problem she'll face is who will take care of the child," Khan says. "Before there used to be large extended families, and there was always a family member or another woman to take care of the child, but as we go more and more into nuclear families that's not the case anymore."

For mothers who do not have the luxury of having family help with childcare, options in Lebanon are limited. While Hana Jojou, president of the syndicate of nurseries and daycare owners in Lebanon, says daycares are allowed by law to enroll children at the age of 70 days, her own nursery, Dent De Lait, takes children in only when they can walk. "Very few daycares accept children at [70 days] because of the risks at that age—the average age they accept children is at four months," she says. "Parents have to be very careful in selecting daycares for their newborns, and it is better to leave them with nurses in that case."

Khan says Jordanian law mandates that if a company has 20 or more mothers with children, then it is the employer's duty to provide an onsite childcare facility for them; in Lebanon this is still

in discussion among private sector players. "Based on our work, we know that the conversation regarding onsite childcare facilities is increasing," says Zeina Mhaidly, program manager at the Lebanese League for Women in Business (LLWB). "One of the main concerns voiced by companies regarding this is that it is a big responsibility, and they would need to train or hire staff for that. The extra cost was also a concern, and they said it would need a feasibility study."

Ali says ABC has made an onsite daycare facility its second priority for 2020, as part of their internal corporate social responsibility goals. "The problem is that there is a high level of responsibility, and also we have three flagships which are geographically diversified, so it's hard to find a good central location for one daycare," says Ali. "We also have to do the financial study on how much it will impact us. But there is a huge benefit because daycares these days are very costly, and also it gives the mother peace of mind that her child is close by and in an environment she trusts."

Some mothers who do not have the option of family childcare either hire a babysitter—though these are still in relatively short supply in Lebanon (see article page 70)—or leave their child with their domestic worker.

## A MOTHER'S MILK

When a woman returns to work after her maternity leave, she is often still lactating and therefore needs workplace provisions to pump her breast milk.

Khan says that Jordan's labor law allows for two half-hour breastfeeding breaks for mothers who have returned to work after maternity leave but says she has seen nothing similar in the Lebanese labor law. LLWB's Mhaidly says they worked with three pilot companies—LibanPost, Fattal, and Teknika—to assess their policies when it comes to gender equality and found that having provisions for breast pumping is very much up to each company's policies and initiative.

Genadry says Libanpost allows lactating mothers to leave work an hour early so they can breast pump, as a mother's milk is important for a baby's development. Bank Audi has designated a breast pumping room in its headquarters. "Since a lot of mothers return from their maternity leave still needing to pump, instead of them using the bathrooms, we have created a lactating room in a private space, which is well equipped and clean for breastfeeding mothers," Manoukian says.

## THE POWER OF FLEXIBILITY

Women need flexibility in their work environment to manage raising a child at the same time as pursuing their career. "Usually, the difficulty women face is in the time where they have small children and are stretched. Basically what they need most in that period is flexibility in time," Genadry says.

The representatives of all the companies Executive spoke to say they have introduced a "flex-hour," meaning employees can come to and leave work an hour early. This is mainly used to escape traffic, but it can also be used by parents to maximize time spent with their children. Samar Diab, head of human resources at the American University of Beirut (AUB), says that they have recently coordinated with the workers and staff syndicate at AUB to implement an alternative to the 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. working schedule. In certain cases employees are allowed to come to work at 7:30 a.m. and leave at 4:30 p.m. "Employees from several departments have asked for this as it helps them with commute, as well as those who have children and want to get back in time to help them with homework," she says.

When a woman returns to work after her maternity leave, she is often still lactating and therefore needs workplace provisions to pump her breast milk.

Liban Post recently introduced part-time work, but Genadry admits that the response has not been very favorable because it can come with reduced pay and benefits. Those who do use it are usually students.

Work from home, or a condensed work week are still not viable options in Lebanon. "You need to have the right culture and have employees who are responsible enough to be granted this privilege. We are not yet there," Genadry says.

A woman who feels comfortable and trusted within her work environment will produce more. "If you give this motivational flexibility it will definitely increase the engagement for working moms and show her that we appreciate her role as a mother, which is as important as her job," Ali says. "I can tell you from my team, when I am flexible with them they feel motivated to give me more."

While it may still be a while before Lebanese women achieve the perfect balance between their role as a parent and their career, the conversation is underway, and there are signs that shifts in societal attitudes and steps taken by employers are heading in the right direction.

By Nabila Rahhal

# ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

Profiles of Lebanese women who juggle a career and childcare

**To paraphrase a popular saying: You cannot truly understand someone until you have walked a mile in their shoes.** Even with all the research and theorizing on the plight of working moms, fully grasping the experience of raising children while maintaining a career requires actually living it, or the next best thing—truly listening to those who do. EXECUTIVE spoke with working moms from different industries, at different career stages, and with children of varying ages, and asked them how they manage to do it all. While these mothers only represent a fraction of the working moms in Lebanon, we hope that there are enough shared experiences for our readers to identify with or learn from.

What emerged from our conversations with these women is that all of them rely on their extended family for childcare. This is not surprising given the tight familial fabric that exists in Lebanon, but could also be a symptom of the lack of easily accessible and available childcare options, such as babysitters (for more see story page 70) or support from employers (see overview page 50).

All of the moms EXECUTIVE profiled also noted that their husbands share the responsibility of raising the children, perhaps an indicator that the traditional image of the Lebanese man who believes his wife's place is at home with the kids is gradually changing. This is not to say that the women we spoke to do not feel that there is still a long way to go before working mothers can be as free to pursue their careers as their husbands are, but at least the conversation has started.

"I won't lie to you that I don't feel guilty sometimes, because I do, but I'm not one of those mothers who are control freaks and worry about their children all the time."

## MOTHERHOOD ON THE ROAD

**Profession:** Middle East video producer at UNHCR
**Children:** A daughter, aged two

Dalal Mawad travels on average five to 10 days per month for her work, despite the fact that she has a two-year-old daughter. "I'm not going to lie; I do miss out on moments [of my daughter growing up] because I'm not there, but it's a choice I made, and I don't see why a dad can have a career, and a mom can't," Mawad says. She personally hates the term "working moms," arguing it should be a given that mothers work—just as it is given that fathers work and are not labeled as working dads.

Mawad says she counts on family support when she is away for work. Her mother lives far from the family, so Mawad relies on her mother-in-law to pick up her daughter from the nursery at 2 p.m. and care for her until she (when in Lebanon) or her husband comes back from work. "My daughter is very fond of her grandmother. It's been easy because I get along with her grandmother when it comes to [child] education and upbringing, so we don't clash. If we had clashed, it would have been much harder. I feel very comfortable and at peace with myself when I am away," Mawad says.

Her husband—who is self-employed but works long hours—is also integral in taking care of his daughter when Mawad is away. "He's there for her bedtime routines, and on the weekends he's with her all the time. We are very equal at home when it comes to child rearing and other responsibilities. This is why I'm able to do what I do, and he's very supportive of what I do. We found a system where we are both comfortable," she says.

Speaking of being away from her daughter when she's traveling, Mawad says: "It's not easy, and I won't lie to you that I don't feel guilty sometimes, because I do, but I'm not one of those mothers who are control freaks and worry about their children all the time. When I'm at work, I focus on my work and I'm at ease because I know she is in good hands. I check on her once a day in the evening when we Skype or FaceTime." Mawad explains that her daughter has gotten used to this lifestyle because she has been traveling since she was still breastfeeding.

When Mawad is in Beirut, her schedule is much more flexible and she spends a lot of time with her daughter. "I try to leave the office early as we don't have stringent hours," she says. "I see her in the morning and dress her up before her dad takes her to school. My job also allows me the flexibility of working from home, so on those days I pick her up from nursery and stay with her all afternoon. I kind of feel that I make it up for other days where I'm gone all the time."

Mawad says she hopes she is providing her daughter with the role model of a woman who is passionate about both her career and her family, and with the example of a father who is engaged in raising his family too.

"Adjusting to work at AUB was a big challenge, as was adjusting to negotiating the responsibilities at home as a result."

## A TALE OF CHILDCARE IN TWO CITIES

**Profession:** Chairperson of the Department of Emergency Medicine and deputy chief medical officer at American University of Beirut Medical Center (AUBMC)
**Children:** Two daughters, aged 14 and 15, and a son, aged 10

Eveline Hitti's three children were born in America. She had her first daughter during her second year of residency—a stage of graduate medical education where one practices medicine under the supervision of a licensed practitioner—at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, and her second daughter a year later. "This is a bit unusual, because in a three-year residency program it's hard to have one child, but I ended up having two," Hitti says. "In hindsight, it was probably not a bad thing because in a residency you can plan to some extent. After residency, and especially for emergency medicine, vacation becomes a bit challenging because you always have to find someone to cover for you." She had her third child while she was working and says she went back to work five weeks later because she "felt the pressure of having to go back to work, both financially, and from the burden on the [team]," whereas with her daughters, she was able to take two months off after each of their births.

In America, Hitti says she was the primary caretaker of the children. During her residency, the couple outsourced childcare to a nanny (her husband was a PhD student at the time), and Hitti would take care of the children when she was home. When she finished her residency, she says she intentionally chose a nonacademic hospital so she could have control over her hours because she knew she was going to shoulder most of the responsibility of childcare. As such, she chose to work three full nights a week, despite that being considered a tough schedule.

When her children were aged one, four, and five, she and her husband decided to move back to Lebanon, and she began working at AUBMC. "The big difference I felt in this transition is that, in Lebanon, there is more family support, but my job changed a lot from the US to Lebanon. In the US, I was working full time, but in a place that was not academic, so I had only my clinical responsibilities, and I feel that helped a lot in that I spent a lot more time with my kids when I was there," Hitti says. "But with AUB came the extra load of teaching, research, and administrative service, which has a high-impact potential, of course, but also a higher time commitment—the spillover into personal and family life is a lot more when you have all these responsibilities. Adjusting to working at AUBMC was a big challenge, as was adjusting to negotiating the responsibilities at home as a result."

Before all of her children started going to school, Hitti says they outsourced childcare to their families and daycares, but there was also a little shift toward her husband—currently a professor of communications at the Lebanese American University—becoming more engaged in childcare.

Hitti became interested in researching the gender gap in careers and shifting the perception of childcare being a mother's responsibility to it being a shared responsibility for two reasons. The first was her personal experience with childcare, the second was attending her 13-year reunion at Johns Hopkins and discovering that four of the eight females who had graduated with her are no longer practicing emergency medicine, while four men in the class had high-level positions in their field.

"When a woman feels supported, she is more productive and dedicated to the job."

## IT TAKES A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

**Profession:** Communication manager at Resource Group
**Children:** A daughter aged four and a half

When Ghina Ramadan was pregnant with her daughter, she was hired by the marketing department of a bank. She recalls telling them that she was pregnant at the time and their reaction being nonchalant, which she found unusual given the stories on corporations shying away from hiring pregnant women.

She returned to the bank after her 70-day maternity leave, which she found too short. "You are still not ready, physically or mentally, [to go back to work]. At that point, the baby still does not have a set sleeping schedule and wakes up at night. After I gave birth, I moved back to my mother's house for six months so she could help me with the baby, and we would alternate waking up with her at night. I felt like I was doing hard time," Ramadan recalls, adding that a fair maternity leave would be six months, in her opinion, although a year off would be ideal.

For the first year and a half of her daughter's life, Ramadan would drop her at her mother's while she was at work, before finally enrolling her in daycare. By that time, Ramadan had left the bank and was working at an advertising agency. Her husband, who worked in the nightlife business and was flexible during the day, would pick up his daughter from daycare at 4 p.m. and drop her at Ramadan's office in downtown. "By its nature, an [advertising] agency job is more flexible with working hours—maybe because we often stay late working on deadlines—so it is beneficial for working mothers. I could even bring my daughter to the office for a bit, which does not happen often in the corporate world," Ramadan says. "My boss had a daughter close to my daughter's age, so she was very understanding and would say that children come first. I would often continue working from home after my daughter slept."

For personal reasons, Ramadan left her work at the agency and was out of the workforce for six months. "It was the first time in my life that I had been without work, and I felt that my life was empty. I felt I was not evolving at the same rate, intellectually or socially, and was not a productive member of society," she recalls.

In early 2018, she began working with her current employer, Resource Group, an investment company. Here again, she benefited, as do all mothers in the company, from the option of working from 8-5 p.m. instead of 9-6 p.m, and from flexible working in case of family emergency. "This is very important, and I recommend that all companies do that. When a woman feels supported, she is more productive and dedicated to the job," Ramadan says. "I know some women whose work did not provide them with this flexibility and they left their jobs. In our society, mothers play the bigger role in raising their families and should be supported at their work so they can do that."

Ramadan believes such flexibility in work conditions requires that employees have a strong work ethic and good time management skills. She often has a quick lunch on her desk or continues working from home so that she is never behind on her workload.

Women's empowerment


"While other career options usually have late working hours, teaching allows my children to be with me most of the time."

## THE GREENER GRASS

**Profession:** First grade teacher at International College (IC)
**Children:** A son aged nine, and a daughter aged five and a half

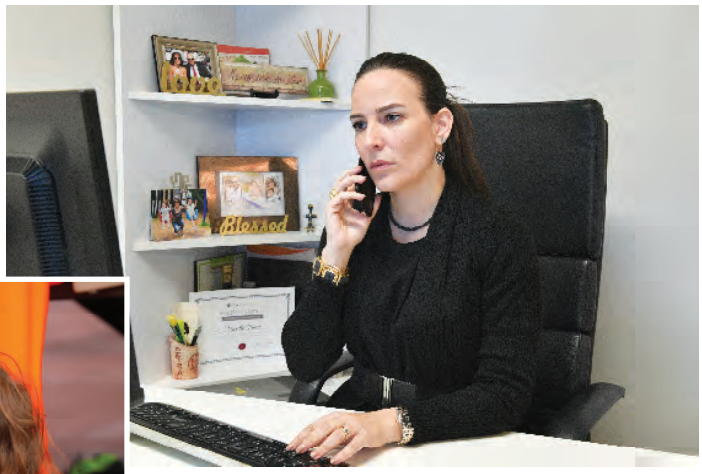
Teaching was traditionally perceived as an ideal job for a mother. While today all career options are—or should be—open to women, teaching still has undeniable benefits for those balancing work and childcare, Layla Shatila says. "The children get to go and come back from school with me, so I don't have to worry about who's going to pick them up and drop them off. While other career options usually have late working hours, teaching allows my children to be with me most of the time, and so I don't have to leave them with the nanny while I am working late." Most days, Shatila leaves school with her children at 2:30 pm, and when she has after-hours meetings they wait for her in her classroom.

Teaching is also convenient for mothers in that—apart from the occasional professional development conferences abroad—no work-related travels are expected. Shatila says teaching also helps her raise her children, since she often uses the same behavior management strategies she uses with her students to discipline them.

She says, however, that teaching is an all consuming job that sometimes leaves her with little energy for her own children. "Teachers are drained physically and mentally from dealing with children all day. I wake up at 6 a.m. and have to be full of energy welcoming the students at 7:30 a.m. and spend the day with them until 2:30 p.m," Shatila says. "We also have meetings twice a week until 4 p.m., so by the time I'm done, I'm drained, but still have to help my son with his homework and spend time playing with both my children."

Before the kids reached the age of two (when they would be allowed to enroll at the daycare located a few steps away from the school she teaches in), Shatila was like any other mother figuring out the best childcare options for her family. With her son, she was lucky enough to be granted an academic year off work and returned to school when he was eight months old. She then left him with her in-laws, who lived near the school in which she taught, and would spend her breaks with him. With her daughter, she was refused a year off work and so she quit. "I felt that I can't leave my children before they are at least eight months old. I stayed with her until she was a year old and then I started work at IC," Shatila recalls. The daughter spent the following year home alone with the domestic helper before being enrolled into daycare. "I would worry about her, but I had no choice. Once she started daycare, and my son was in school already, things got much easier."

Although Shatila is not at work in the afternoons, she still has a lot going on and has to manage her time efficiently. "I have to be very thorough in organizing my time between my lesson planning and work responsibilities, and my children's activities, wellbeing, and homework," she says. "I also need 'me time,' which is usually spent at the gym, while the children stay home with their father or with the helper. I also have to think of my time with my husband, which we barely have because one of us is usually with the children."




"It is overwhelming, but I love it. Everybody asks me how I manage, and the answer is that I don't manage, I do my best and try to manage."

## A HECTIC YET FUN LIFE

**Profession:** Head of business development and communication at FFA Real Estate
**Children:** Three sons aged two, four, and seven

For Mireille Korab, juggling a demanding career while raising three boys is a challenge she relishes. "It is overwhelming, but I love it. Everybody asks me how I manage, and the answer is that I don't manage, I do my best and try to manage," Korab says.

Speaking about the experience of having three boys while growing a career, Korab says: "With each child, it got easier emotionally because you get used to the idea that you have to leave the house to come back to work, and that you have to separate the working hours from the mothering and worrying hours. But it gets harder trying to fit in taking care of three boys and managing your job up to your standards and taking care of the house, the husband, and your social life, and trying to find time for your self-care, and even for shopping because there is no time for shopping—thank God for Instagram so that we can shop online!"

Korab says her job entails attending afternoon and evening engagements, such as gala dinners or receptions and openings for clients' places, which takes time away from her family. She feels the hour and a half during which she carries out bedtime routines with her boys is a crucial time for her, so she has taken to leaving the office early, if possible, when she has evening commitments, even if she spends extra time commuting.

Korab had a live-in Lebanese nanny, Angel, who moved in with her when each child was born and stayed for the first year. "Angel is an essential part of me being able to have three kids while working full time and commuting three hours to and from home in Adma[to Beirut]," Korab says.

Now that her sons are older, she relies on family support for childcare. "My husband and immediate family are really a big support in handling everything in terms of the children's activities and commuting from school," Korab says, adding that she would not have been able to do it without her husband, who is very helpful with the children, handling the logistics of their daily commutes and waking up with them when needed. She and her husband make sure they do not travel for work at the same time so one of them is always with the children.

When her first son was younger, he would ask Korab why she did not pick him up from school like most of the other mothers. She has since made it a point to highlight that each member of their family has an independent life. "I make it a point to share little events from my day with them, and I ask them about theirs. That way, I show them that they can have their own day without needing their mother to be around," she explains.

Korab hopes that she and her husband are good role models for their boys. "I think that their dad and I giving them this model of working parents who really try to do their best for their kids, and who organize their time for them, should push them to find partners who have this same ambition, and are really helpful to their partners. This is when I will see if I did it or not, when I see how they will treat their spouses," she says.

"As a working mother, I have to always compensate and balance. If I'm traveling one weekend, I make sure to spend extra time with my husband and children the following weekend."

## OF PASSION AND DELEGATION

**Profession:** Chief Operating Officer of Robinson Agri
**Children:** A daughter aged 15, and a son aged 18

To Nadine el-Khoury Kadi, being a successful working mother entails three main aspects: a good support team, delegation, and passion.

Khoury Kadi's support team includes her parents who helped her with childcare and household tasks. "When my children were young, I would leave them at my parents' [home] or my husband's parents. When they started going to school, they would go to there afterwards," she recalls.

Her husband provides unconditional support so that she may excel in her career and looks after the children when she has business trips. "In Lebanon, we are luckier than in Europe because we have an extended family support system. Also, all the husbands I know are supportive of their wives' careers, and so the perception of the traditional Middle Eastern man is changing in my opinion. My father, for example, equipped us with culture, education, independence, and thinking out of the box, " Khoury Kadi says.

At work, Khoury Kadi is supported by her sister who shares her passion for innovation and sustainability. Together, they run a successful enterprise, leaving a special mark in the agricultural sector. As COO, Khoury Kadi has learned the power of delegation. "Alone we can go fast, together we will go far. The more a leader empowers her employees, the better they perform at the job. As such, we create an environment for the team where sharing knowledge and values is a source of strength," she mentiones.

Being a working mother herself, Khoury Kadi says she knows what it means to balance work and home. Saturdays are days off, and she allows her employees—both women and men—to leave work early, or take time off if they have something related to their children. "But they all continue their work at home and meet their deadlines, even if they left the office early. This is because they know I trust them, and they are happy, so they produce more," Kadi explains.

Finally, Khoury Kadi loves her work. "I am passionate about agriculture and aim to develop smarter farming and solutions. This summarizes my moto in life: the three Ps of patience, passion, and perseverence" she says.

Khoury Kadi compares her brain to an excel sheet and says she has to be very organized to strike a healthy balance between work and home. "As a working mother, I have to always compensate and balance. If I'm traveling one weekend, I make sure to spend extra time with my husband and children the following weekend, for example," she says.

Khoury Kadi says parenting her teenagers is a different experience than when they were children. "They are confused at this age, and you have to know how to approach them. It is a nicer age in a way, but harder for a parent," she says.

Khoury Kadi has worked throughout her children's lives and says this is very natural to them, especially since some of their friends' mothers work. "When they see me on TV they are very proud that I work and am successful. My husband and I still make time for them, and we travel together as a family on an annual basis, no matter what happens," she says.

## LIVING WITH GUILT

**Profession:** Head of Human Resources at Bank Audi
**Children:** Two sons, aged nine and 13

To Nayiri Manoukian, being a working mother is perfectly summarized in this quote: "Women are expected to work as if they don't have a family and raise their family as if they don't have work."

Manoukian believes the core issue facing working mothers today is an intrinsic feeling of guilt that they are not doing enough for their families. In her opinion, this is related to the way women are raised. "I come from a family where my mother never worked and would always have lunch prepared when we came back from school. So I come from this background of a traditional mother who raised me to always put family first," Manoukian says. Her father, however, raised her with a different perspective, supportive of a working woman. "He was insistent I obtain higher education, something he was deprived from, and continue to learn as long as I am able to do so," she says. "He was also insisting on financial independence, continuously preaching to spend with caution and be in control of my financial situation."

When she got married and had her first child, she continued to rely on her parents' support. "When I gave birth to my first child," Manoukian recalls, "I used to work in oil and gas and would stay in the office until minimum 7 p.m. I would alternate leaving my son at my mother's and my mother-in-law['s home]. You can imagine my mother's attitude in regards to me picking up my son late at night, and she would berate me for not having time for my family and child! On the other side, I had the full support of my father and husband, who would remind me that my career is very important, and that I should focus on it."

Although her husband has been very supportive of her career since day one, she is still expected to manage the household and childcare. "I delegate of course, or as my husband puts it, I subcontract. So I don't do the cooking, but I am the one who has to make sure the cooking is done; I don't clean the house myself, but I make sure the house is clean etc—this takes time," Manoukian explains, adding that now that her kids are older, they are independent enough to stay home with the helper until she is back from work.

> "I think I am raising my boys to expect their wives to be sharing with them the household expenses, as well as raising the children."

All this led to a feeling of "mom guilt," which Manoukian feels all women share to some extent. "With my second son, I remember coming back from my maternity leave with tears in my eyes and thinking I had one (child) whom I never had enough time for, and now I have two. Why am I putting them through all this?" she asks.

When she shares her feelings of guilt with her husband, Manoukian says he reminds her that the boys will eventually leave them to start a life of their own, so all she can do is be an example for what they should look for in a partner. "I think I am raising my boys to expect their wives to be sharing with them the household expenses, as well as raising the children," Manoukian says. "They should see women as equal partners. It is our generation that will raise the next one to have the right mentality, and that will go into the next generation."

Women's empowerment

By Lauren Holtmeier

# REDEFINING ROLES

Refugee women take on new roles in their families

Fleeing conflict, leaving one's home, and settling in a strange—and often unwelcoming—environment is challenging. For female refugees these challenges can be compounded, as many experience a shift in their accustomed gender roles. Many women in Syria played the role of housewife, but in Lebanon they must assume a new role—that of breadwinner. The 2018 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (VASyR), a report compiled annually since 2013, estimates that 18 percent of households are female-headed and that 16 percent of women participate in the labor force. The percentage of women engaged in formal or informal employment is low, but most women take on more work as a refugee, even if that work is leaving the house to collect humanitarian aid. EXECUTIVE interviewed six refugee women; only one said her role in the family largely remained the same.

This shift in gender roles affects all female Syrian refugees, whether single or married. But the breadth of work refugee women engage in is varied. While some refugee families can afford apartments in Beirut, and as a consequence, typically have improved access to more diversified labor markets, some live in crowded informal settlements in the Bekaa Valley and are limited in the type of work that is available to them.

Saja Michael, a gender and diversity technical adviser at ABAAD, a gender equality organization, says that socioeconomic status plays a large role in

determining what type of work refugees may find. "If you're a Syrian refugee who's a bit better off, definitely you're going to have access to employment opportunities that a Syrian refugee from a lower socioeconomic class will probably not have access to," she says.

For those at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum, many find work in the fields. The 2018 VASyR cites that of employed women the highest percentage work in agriculture (38 percent). According to Michael, whether the woman came from urban vs. rural areas in Syria also often gives an indication as to what type of work, if any, they did back home.

## INCREASING RESPONSIBILITY

"It's important to understand where they're coming from in Syria," Michael says. "So if you're coming from urban vs. rural, I think it's an oversimplification to say Syrian women are more-used to child rearing. In some areas, I think this is the norm, but in more urban settings, women are more likely to be economic providers and caretakers."

Wiam Ghabash, originally from Darayya, a suburb of Damascus, worked for the Syrian Ministry of Health as an English teacher for nursing students. Arriving in Chtoura in 2014, for her finding work in Lebanon was a continuation of the norm. She works here as an IT and digital security trainer, and runs training sessions on human rights and women's rights at Women Now for Development, an organization that works with Syrian refugees. But even for Ghabash, who has degrees in public health and English, finding work in Lebanon was challenging.

"It was a difficult stage," Ghabash says. "I remember spending eight months walking in the streets, looking for jobs. I reduced the expectation to the minimal level. Like, it's ok if I get a job answering the phone in an office or cleaning offices."

While Ghabash would have been happy to do any job to support her family of six, she eventually picked up a six-month contract at Oxfam, but this did not solve her long-term financial problems. She says that the Lebanese system makes it hard for Syrians to find work; even if they find work with an NGO, the contract cannot be extended past six months for Syrians.

Syrian refugees began arriving in Lebanon in 2011, and currently there are just under 1 million Syrians registered with UNHCR. Shortly after Ghabash made the trip to Lebanon, at the end of 2014, the government introduced new policies

*Razan Hussami, Anamel's founder, stands in a room where refugee women sew.*

aimed at reducing the number of displaced Syrians. These measures included requiring Syrians to register with the UNHCR and sign a pledge not to work, or to find a Lebanese sponsor to stay in the country legally and pay a $200 residency fee every six months.

For four years Ghabash renewed her residency without issue because she had signed the pledge not to work. However, the last time she went to renew her permit, General Security had learned she had been working and stamped a deportation notice on her passport, effectively rendering her immobile within Lebanon. Ghabash is confined to an approximate 10 kilometer radius around her home for fear of what might happen if she is stopped at a checkpoint.

■ The Lebanese system makes it hard for Syrians to find work; even if they find work with an NGO, the contract cannot be extended past six months for Syrians.

Ghabash's future may be uncertain, but she knows for sure that she is not going back to Syria. UNHCR has an agreement with the Lebanese government that they cannot forcibly return anyone to Syria. She has applied for asylum in France and Italy and was waiting for her asylum interview when EXECUTIVE spoke with her.

Ghabash's story is just one example of the myriad challenges Syrian refugees face in Lebanon.

Women's empowerment

Following these new regulations, in May 2015, UNHCR suspended registering refugees all together per the host government's decision, leaving many refugees without documentation or the ability to obtain it.

At this point, more women had to find work as they were no longer able to rely on humanitarian aid to feed their families, says Sabah Hallak, a gender expert at Citizenship League, an NGO that works with Syrian refugees. Confined to working in the construction, agriculture, and environment sector per Lebanese labor law, refugees are limited in their opportunities to find employment. Female refugees are further limited because construction is a typically a male-dominated field. Hallak says that most work in the informal sector, primarily in the fields picking crops. This, of course, is seasonal work, meaning that in order to survive on these earning you would have to save.

## MAKING ENDS MEET

Saving money, however, is hard when wages are low. For those who work in the fields, Michael estimates that women and children may earn LL4,000 - 6,000 for a four to five hour shift, and many will work two shifts a day, making their daily wage around LL8,000 - 12,000. Men make around LL15,000 per shift. A refugee in the Sheikh Raja settlement outside Chtoura in the Bekaa Valley who preferred to be mentioned by her first name, Jouriya, recalls making LL6,000 for a five hour shift, while the men "made more, because they are men." An International Labor Organization (ILO) report using data from 2014 found that Syrian refugee women earned on average LL248,000 per month, where the men's average earning was LL432,000. Women earn less than men, and where women are the sole economic provider in a household, like Jouriya, they will likely be more hard-pressed to make ends meet than men in the same situation.

Jouriya worked in the fields three years ago, but now she has established a tutoring center for 19 children in the camp and also studies radiology. She is the only one in her family of five who works. Even though she charges LL55,000 per month, most people cannot afford her fee, so they pay her what they can. She says she earns around $40 per month to support her family. Her parents are too old to work, and her brother has not been able to find any, leaving the brunt of the responsibility on Jouriya's shoulders.

In Idlib, Jouriya and her family owned their own land. The family grew their own food, and Jouriya taught fourth graders in her hometown. It was a simple life, but a stable one. Here, her family receives the UN nutrition card each month that comes loaded with LL120,000. When asked if this and her income from tutoring are enough to feed her family of five, Jouriya says, "we do our best."

> Where women are the sole economic provider in a household, they will likely be more hard-pressed to make ends meet than men.

Part of the reason many women accept agricultural work, even though the wages fall far below minimum wage (LL30,000 per day or LL675,000 per month) is economic necessity. Women are also more vulnerable to losing hard found work. If a contractor needs to reduce the

number of workers on the site, the women are the first to go, says Frida Khan, a senior gender specialist in the ILO Regional Office for Arab States.

An ILO program, the Employment Intensive Infrastructure Program (EIIP), established in 2017, sought to help both men and women get into jobs in the construction sector. Participants are guaranteed employment for a certain number of days in the EIIP program, and then, ideally, will find other work in the sector. As the EIIP guarantees both a period of work and the minimum wage, it is an attractive option for Syrian refugee women who are often underpaid and struggle to break into male-dominated sectors.

Even though many women must work out of economic necessity, most refugee women would prefer not to, both Khan and Razan Hussami, founder of Anamel, an organization that works with refugee women, say separately. At the onset of the crisis, more refugee women reported going outside the home to make economic contributions to their families, but this did not necessarily mean working in the fields. Up until early 2015, women left the home to collect humanitarian aid at designated locations. While it was not a job, women felt burdened by the extra responsibility of having to collect aid in addition to taking care of their families, Michael explains.

Others have learned skills such as sewing or cutting hair to earn money. Across the country, programs have been established to provide refugee women an opportunity to learn new skills and provide a place where they can work to support their families.

One example is Hussami's program Anamel. In a two-story workhouse in Bchamoun just outside Beirut, women learn skills they can use to make a living. A tutoring center at Anamel offers women reading and writing classes, and children who cannot attend school, either because they lack proper identification or there are no available spots, also learn at the center.

Hussami says that many women who attend training sessions at the center are then able to find work in the community, and that these kinds of programs give women a sense of purpose and community and are empowering. Hallak, however has a slightly less optimistic view of these type of programs.

"At first we taught them sewing and hair cutting; some learned to make handicrafts," she says. "But now, things are not good in the camps. Who needs the coiffeur?"

## A DIFFERENCE IN OPINIONS

It seems organizations, in their attempt to help provide women with livelihoods, flooded the market in camps for these certain skills. Hallak says now there is a shift to teaching women English and equipping them with computer skills. These types of skills may benefit women in the long run, but the restrictions placed on Syrian workers in Lebanon in terms of which fields they can legally work in and the limited jobs available will make it difficult for many to apply these newly learned skills and join the workforce.

■ Now there is a shift to teaching women English and equipping them with computer skills.

Miriam, a refugee from the rural area outside Raqqa, and Sarah Youssef Hussein, originally from a rural area of the Idlib governorate, do not work

## Women's empowerment

but have differing opinions on the matter.

Hussein fled to Lebanon in 2012 with her husband and son, and, unlike Miriam, would love to find work, but if she works there will be no one to take care of the children. They have had two children since coming to Lebanon. Her husband, who has no formal employment, typically begins his day under a bridge near the camp and hopes to find a day's work. If successful, he will earn around $10 that will go toward feeding a family of five. Her family used to collect $260 a month in aid she says, but they have not received any help since October 2018.

Miriam, once illiterate, has been learning to read and write at Anamel for the last two years. Before going to the center, she spent her days at home alone. Everyone in her family of eight either go to work or school during the day, and, for Miriam, studying is a way to pass the time.

"At least when I go back to Syria, I didn't waste my years here," she says.

In Syria, Miriam took care of her family and tended the family sheep and garden. When the fighting in Raqqa intensified in 2014, the family sold its sheep and fled toward the border, eventually settling in Bchamoun. Miriam considers herself lucky that her husband and two daughters work, so she is free to continue her homemaker duties, largely as she did in Syria.

Like Miriam, Souad from Abu Kamal in the Deir ez-Zor governorate in Syria, a sous-chef at Anamel, would rather take care of her seven children than work. Another woman at Anamel, Zahra from Aleppo, teaches women to crochet three days a week, and while she enjoys her work, she feels guilty that she cannot spend more time taking care of her family.

ABAAD's Michael says that, as a women's organization, seeing women become providers and playing a larger role in their households, staff at ABAAD were excited. But this did not necessarily reflect the reality for the women; many were overburdened by their new role. "Any working woman has two jobs," Michael says, referring to the pre-defined role as caretaker in addition to any income-deriving activity.

For the women who worked before coming to Lebanon, like Ghabash and Jouriya, this shift seems less harsh. But these women are still the primary economic provider for their families. For women like Souad and Zahra, their shifting role is more dramatic as they did not work outside the home in Syria. Perhaps the only commonality is that refugee women, for the most part, have an increased role in caring and providing for their families as refugees, regardless of individual feelings on that role.

> "From what I've seen from four years working here, I see a definite change in gender roles."

"From what I've seen from four years working here, I see a definite change in gender roles," Ghabash says. "Maybe this is a positive side of the war, that we have an increased role here. Some focus on the work and exploitation. The other side is that they're the decision-maker, the breadwinner. They're not aware that it's a privilege."

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Women's empowerment

By Zeina Zeidan Maalouly

# THE GREATEST ADVENTURE

Balancing motherhood and a career

**The greatest adventure of all, that is how I would describe my dual journey: my career and motherhood.** The ability to balance two vastly different worlds is testament to the versatility and strength that lies within each woman. This ability is often left untapped and underappreciated, because the world continually tries to convince us that we are the weaker sex.

Work has been a constant part of my life since my late teenage years because school fees always had to be paid. I had to combine a hectic scholastic life with as many working hours as possible to make ends meet. I was so determined to realize my dream of becoming a successful businesswoman and entrepreneur that I gave little attention to anything else.

I must confess that motherhood was not at the top of my mind during my early twenties, and it remained that way until I met my husband. After marriage, like most married couples, we discussed whether or not we should start a family. But with my career moving forward, as well as my husband's, the question was: How can we juggle work and a child? I was confident that I would be able to balance life as a businesswomen and a mother—after all, I had managed to juggle work and school. But the first challenge came when I was pregnant and still had to work; it was a trying, yet exciting time.

When my first child was born, it was definitely a life-changing experience. It made every other experience pale in comparison. I was one of those mothers who bonded with my baby even before I gave birth. I felt as if I knew my child. Being a working mother, I felt torn apart. Society makes many of us feel guilty for wanting to pursue a career after having children, and I was prey to those dark thoughts for a while.

Society makes many of us feel guilty for wanting to pursue a career after having children, and I was prey to those dark thoughts for a while.

Our motherly instincts drive us to provide comfort and security, so the idea of leaving our precious little one at home with someone else can

feel like a betrayal or abandonment. I struggled with these feelings, and it took me some time to come to terms with the situation. Women are expected to place themselves on the altar of sacrifice, to not compromise, and those who choose to—or have to—work are silently persecuted for wanting to have it all. This is the cultural reality.

## REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

My experience of being a new mother while also trying to keep my career moving forward made me realize that we cannot have it all. It is simply not humanly possible. Nevertheless, simple changes would have made it easier—not just for me, but for all mothers. This support includes longer parental leave and greater flexibility in the workplace. If we want more women to be in the workplace and to ascend the career ladder, women should not have to make tough compromises.

The current business arena is set up without such support, and so there will always be many instances where I am forced to miss out on important milestones, either in my child's life, or in my career. I could miss my toddler's first word because I had a meeting. Or I could miss out on a work opportunity or a client because my child is sick and needs attention. Beating myself up about such things is futile. I have learned to let go of attempting to make every moment perfect and memorable. Even full-time mothers cannot live up to such unrealistic expectations.

Once I broke free from the shackles of expectations, I had to perfect the art of compromise. Tomorrow there is always a chance to compensate for what was missed today. I do what it takes—even if it means moving my schedule around to wake up earlier or stay up later, or working overtime—to ensure I can enjoy a long weekend of quality time with my child. I see time as something much like the love between a mother and a child: a priceless thing that must be given unconditionally. This is why I strive to ensure my family feels loved, and why I soak up their love in return. It is a heart-warming shield that counterbalances the cutthroat world of business and finance.

With regard to the impact being a mother has had on my career itself, it has helped me develop patience and become exceedingly good at managing time. Those two attributes have made me more efficient, which has benefited both business and family life.

## THE POWER OF TEAMWORK

Building reliable support networks at work, and also closer to home, has been equally essential. These networks enable me to delegate and trust the right people for the right jobs. As a leader, knowing that I have a team capable of handling even the small details gives me the total confidence to make the best decisions for the company.

It is true that it is challenging to go against the tide of cultural expectations about motherhood, and I have seen so many talented women leave jobs they love to raise their children. And yet, it is ultimately about managing the emotional energy tied to your home, just as you would for work. As my career continues to evolve, the realization that I am not just working for myself, or my future self, but also for my child, the next generation, gives me extra drive to push ahead in this greatest of adventures.

Once I broke free from the shackles of expectations, I had to perfect the art of compromise.

*Zeina Zeidan Maalouly, PhD, is chair of the board at Royal Financials sal.*

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Women's empowerment

*By Angela Solomon*

# CHILDCARE IS NOT JUST A PRACTICAL PROBLEM

How Lebanese mothers can transition back to work

**I had been working in childcare for two years before I became a mom.** As a founder of Jaleesa, an online platform to find babysitters and nannies in Lebanon, I have spoken to hundreds of parents—mainly moms—about the challenges of work and childcare. Parents have helped us to define a carer's main role: to keep the kids safe, clean, and fed—and to support their development.

But now I am a parent myself, I realize this is just the beginning. Another key role of childcare is to relieve the pressure on parents. For the wellbeing of the whole family, there has to be a good childcare plan in place when mom returns to work.

Maternity leave is not generous in Lebanon; new mothers find themselves leaving their 70-day-old babies in the care of others as they head back to work. I look at photos of my baby at that age—he was so vulnerable and small. How could I have gone back to work? How could I have concentrated for a whole day on anything but him? It seems impossible—but I did it, just like thousands of other moms. And I was able to do it because I had a childcare plan in place that I trusted was good for my baby.

Designing a childcare plan is not just about solving a practical problem, it is an emotional issue. We are looking for peace of mind and the best for our kids. We also need to know that things are sorted at home, so we can concentrate at work. This is not an easy task, the lack of accessible childcare is one of the greatest barriers moms face when

hoping to return to work. A 2017 OCED Gender Equality Report found that the most common response—cited by 23 countries—when asked for the three most effective ways to tackle barriers to female employment was "making childcare more accessible."

When parents return to work, they have to weigh their options. Most people's childcare plans combine one or more elements from the available options: daycare, a family member, a domestic worker, and a nanny.

## FINDING THE RIGHT FIT

There are some truly excellent daycares in Lebanon, and this can be a cost effective part of a working parent's childcare plan. Daycare is a chance for kids to learn to socialize, which they start to need at around 13-23 months according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Before this age, babies are interested in other babies, but their brains are not yet developed enough to make friends with their peers, so socialising is more about learning to trust other adults and caregivers. Parents have to anticipate that their children will pick up illnesses while their immunity develops, and that can impact on parents' ability to work productively. Flexibility can also be a challenge: worrying about getting through traffic to fetch the kids is a stress working parents do not need.

In some families, when a new baby is born, *teta* steps in as a childcarer. For those who have this option it is fantastic; nobody is better qualified to teach young babies how it feels to be loved, nurtured, and looked after than those who raised us. But with our parents enjoying their health, and working later before retiring, this is not an option for everyone. My mom would love to spend more time with her grandson, but in her mid-sixties she is still busy with her own work, commitments, and travel.

Some families decide to put their domestic worker in charge of childcare, although this is not a choice I would make. I want my carer to be 100 percent focused on the baby, not worrying about other household tasks at the same time. And while many families still do have a live-in domestic worker, not all newlyweds can afford a big enough home to share with employees—if they even want to share their private space at all.

A nanny can be the main solution, she (or he) can be the glue that holds the childcare plan together. Some people fear that a professional nanny will be very expensive, but combining a full or part-time nanny with support from grandma, daycare, and flexible working can actually save the family money.

Hiring your own childcarer or nanny also helps relieve some of the avoidable stresses of returning to work. Childcare is the clear priority, but when the baby's sleeping my nanny is so proactive that sometimes I feel I have a sitter, home helper, and PA all in one. She is not just part of my baby's daily schedule, but also supports our parenting choices and helps to manage challenges like tantrums, weaning, and sleep routines. Jaleesa hand-picks childcarers through an extensive vetting, interview, and training process, designed to find people who are trustworthy, professional, experienced, and who love kids.

A big part of me was happy to return to work—perhaps in part because I work for my own company, and we are extremely parent-friendly. My nanny could bring the baby to the office at lunchtimes so I could feed him, and my team have been very open-minded about this (though our auditors found it to be quite a shock). We have all gotten used to the growl of the breast pump in the office twice a day. However, it has not all been smooth. Some days, I start later and finish earlier than I would like. Not everyone can enjoy so much flexibility, but with the right support at home, hopefully other mothers can find their return to work less stressful too.

> "Childcare is not just about liberating our time for productivity, it is about freeing up our brain-space so we can be fully present at work."

Childcare is not just about liberating our time for productivity, it is about freeing up our brain-space so we can be fully present at work. Having a plan, even one concocted from several options, is the first step toward a smooth transition back. Of course there are always hiccups along the road. My baby bumped his head for the first time because I was checking work emails on my phone. I feel guilty about that, of course. But I absolutely do not feel guilty about going back to work, because my baby is well looked after by a nanny I trust. To offer that peace of mind to more families, my plan is to keep working as long and hard—and flexibly—as I can.

*Angela Solomon is co-founder of Jaleesa, an online platform for babysitting services in Lebanon.*