



YOUNG LAWYERS
DIVISION

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The Best Jobs in the World: **Balancing Motherhood and the Legal Profession** by Grace Benitone Burnett

In a field dominated by men, balancing the societal pressures of being both a mother and a successful woman in the legal profession undoubtedly hindered our predecessors from maximizing joy while balancing these jobs. The good news: times are changing.

While male barristers came to America well before 1776, a female was not licensed to practice law in the United States until 1869.¹ In 1907, Tennesseans finally permitted Marion Griffin to practice law after her initial denial of admission based on gender, rather than bar examination passage.² Still, women were the minority in this noble profession for decades. According to the American Bar Association (ABA), the number of female law students doubled by the decade from 1970 (in which only 9% of law students were female) to 1980.³ Women continued to increase their presence in the field through the 1990s and 2000s. By 2016, women made up 50.3% of all law students in America; however, female law school *graduates* did not surpass men until 2019 when they made up 52.6% of those awarded law degrees.⁴

By 2023, women made up the majority of federal government attorneys, and in January 2024, the National Association for Law Placement announced women made up the majority of all law firm associates.⁵ Yet, only 28% of law firm partners were women.⁶ Further, approximately 49.2% of faculty at ABA-accredited law schools were women in 2023.

At this point, no state has a female majority of lawyers, and men still dominate Tennessee at approximately 61.6% of lawyers. Men still dominate the judiciary and general counsel positions; however, there is certainly more evidence of equal representation and female prominence in the overall field.⁷

As evidenced above, women have made great headway asserting their presence in the legal field. Yet, many women feel pressure to excel in both the workplace and as a mother. It is important for our male colleagues and current leaders to be mindful of the additional pressures that many women face outside of the courtroom or law office. Women attorneys should still be challenged and afforded the same professional opportunities. Yet, there is opportunity for men to practice compassion, understanding, flexibility and creativity in helping their female colleagues succeed. Some female attorneys may not have been afforded these benefits, and it is important that male attorneys are careful not to

perpetuate traditional attitudes that prevent working mothers from maximizing their potential.

The legal profession inherently brings pressure and stress, as does the role of motherhood. Most lawyers in private practice deal with billable hour requirements, or at least billable hour goals. At the same time, postpartum recovery, nursing, carpool, child extracurriculars and taking care of the home or meals are often being tended to. Very little time is left in the day to decompress or pursue any other personal activities. We must be more considerate of the effects motherhood and work have on mental health.

As a profession, we are doing better to be mindful of the pressure that family and professional balance bring. Still, there is room for improvement. Ensuring autonomy over scheduling, billable hour goals rather than requirements and compassion in the workplace enable women to successfully balance work and family. In turn, women must be careful not to abuse their afforded compassion and flexibility to promote a continued reverence towards work-life balance for future female attorneys.

As men in the legal field become increasingly more involved in family life, women should honor the man's role in the family by offering the flexibility and understanding women wish to be afforded. Not every man or woman wants to be or is a parent, but when one desires to be and take on an active role, we as a profession need to support both man and woman. This attitude aligns with the mental health initiatives that have become so prominent in our profession, preventing burnout and promoting respect for lawyers everywhere. Why wouldn't we want attorneys to experience joy in both home and at work? Surely, there is better work product and workplace stability when an appropriate work-life balance is reached.

On a more personal note, I am fortunate to work for a firm that values both family and professional excellence. I have been met with compassion and appreciation for my role as both a mother and a young lawyer, which I return with loyalty to my colleagues and workplace. I believe an emphasis on work-life balance is both the future and recipe for success in our profession, and I urge the more traditional individuals in our field to consider the longterm professional benefits of enabling women to succeed in both jobs as "mother" and "attorney." I am grateful that I have been able to balance these two jobs, and I hope other female attorneys in our state are met with the same respect that I have encountered.



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NOTES

¹ National Conference of Women's Bar Associations, Women Lawyer "Firsts," ncwba.org/history/women-lawyer-firsts.

² Marion Scudder Griffin Collection, Memphis Public Library and Information Center, Memphis and Shelby County Room, 2014.

³ American Bar Association, Women in the Legal Profession, 2024, www.americanbar.org/news/profile-legal-profession/women.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*