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A Woman-Led Law Firm That Lets Partners Be Parents

By NOAM SCHEIBER MAY 1, 2015



Maria Simon, a lawyer in Washington, drops off her 4-year-old son, Jack, at school before work. Credit Lexey Swall for The New York Times

Just past 9:30 on a Wednesday morning in March, after she drove 20 minutes to drop her son, Jack, off at preschool, after she trekked back for an hour across the Washington metro area into Fairfax, Va., for work, and long, long after she answered her first email, Maria Simon sat in a windowless conference room weighing the odds that she would be able to make a party in Jack's class two days hence.

Ms. Simon was determined to attend, but the party was at 12:30 p.m. and she knew it would monopolize her afternoon. “Once he sees me, I can’t leave,” she said. “I’m going to have a sugared-up kid.”

She did not say this with dread. She considered the chance to spend a few hours with a bouncy 4-year-old one of the chief benefits of her job. Ms. Simon is a partner at the Geller Law Group, a six-woman firm, the founding credo of which is family-friendliness and whose stance on office face time is best described as “militantly against.”

In addition to practicing law, Ms. Simon and her law partner, Rebecca Geller, have a near-evangelical determination to show that parents can nurture their professional ambitions while being fully present in their children’s lives. Ms. Simon has such conviction on this point that she is almost personally offended by suggestions it might not be possible. The widely read and debated 2012 [essay in The Atlantic](#), “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” by Anne-Marie Slaughter, a former State Department official, is a particular source of irritation. “I think women can have it all,” she said. “It’s just based on your paradigm of ‘all.’ ”



Ms. Simon and Jack at home. She is a partner at the Geller Law Group, whose guiding principle is family-friendliness. Credit Lexey Swall for The New York Times

Ms. Simon’s paradigm is not what the popularizer of the term would have endorsed. In 1982, Helen Gurley Brown, the longtime editor of *Cosmopolitan*, published a book called “Having It All: Love, Success, Sex, Money, Even if You’re Starting With Nothing.” As Jennifer

Szalai noted in [a recent essay](#) in The New York Times Magazine, Ms. Brown didn't have children and wasn't especially eager to incorporate them into her vision of modern womanhood. But the phrase somehow stuck as a shorthand for the aspiration of working mothers — or, depending on your view, a fantasy that women were doomed to fall short of.

While the legal profession doesn't offer the grimmest odds in this regard — that distinction probably goes to finance — the challenges it poses are considerable. Not least is that would-be partners must typically bill more than 2,000 hours a year, easily a 60- to 70-hour workweek once you allow for human interaction and trips to the bathroom.

Women accounted for a mere 16.5 percent of law partners in 2013, according to the [National Association for Law Placement](#), despite graduating from law school in roughly equal numbers as men over the previous decade, according to the [American Bar Association](#). A [2007 report](#) by the M.I.T. Workplace Center found that by far the most important reason women gave for deserting the partnership track was “the difficulty of combining law firm work and caring for children in a system that requires long hours under high pressure with little or inconsistent support for flexible work arrangements.”

The M.I.T. study mirrored complaints I heard [while reporting](#) on a large Chicago firm called Mayer Brown for The New Republic two years ago. One former Mayer Brown associate told me that when the firm's female partners held seminars on achieving work-life balance, the advice was frequently “Outsource your life,” which, they explained, meant finding a spouse willing to stay at home with children, or hiring a nanny, cook and housekeeper.

It's this outsourcing that so depresses Ms. Simon and Ms. Geller, who consider domestic obligations central to the “all” they've set their sights on.

Ms. Geller wanted to spend part of her daytime hours around her children without giving up on a legal career. “I saw no role models who didn't have a husband as a stay-at-home dad,” Ms. Geller said of the partners at the large firm she left before starting the Geller Law Group in 2011. Ms. Simon wanted to be home for dinner and attend school events without worrying about how it would affect her annual review.

And so their partnership became a small-scale experiment in parenting while employed. Their lives are not so different from those of many other parents. And like all experiments, the reality has been messier than the theory.

By 10 a.m. on that Wednesday in March, Ms. Simon was seated in front of a client, formerly the president of a condominium association that was now suing him. (The client gave me permission to sit in on the meeting.)



Ms. Simon, left, and her law partner, Rebecca Geller, center, do not have a set office but instead rent rooms at a shared work space by the hour or day. Credit Lexey Swall for The New York Times

Ms. Simon began to review each count of the civil complaint against him, MacBook open and legal pad at the ready. She had a litigator's game face that was only occasionally undone by a wry smile she couldn't quite suppress.

"I have to ask," Ms. Simon said at one point. "Did you ever falsely represent yourself as an attorney?" The client explained that he had once told a local agency that he was appearing before it as an attorney but that he had meant it "in the British sense," in that he had power of attorney. "You know you're not supposed to say that, right?" Ms. Simon deadpanned.

"Yes, lesson learned," he said.

Ms. Simon joined the Geller Law Group two years ago. She previously worked at a boutique Washington firm, but the demands were too much after she had Jack. (One telltale sign: An opposing counsel asked why she was still emailing him while in labor.) In 2013, a mutual friend suggested she reach out to Ms. Geller. They spent part of their get-to-know-you coffee meeting talking about their kids' schedules. "It was: 'How does this work? How can this work?' " Ms. Simon recalled. She agreed to join part time.

Within a few months, however, the 10- to 15-hour-a-week commitment became 60 to 70. The firm was growing rapidly, helping clients set up trusts and wills, doing small-business incorporations, even handling the occasional marital dispute, and Ms. Simon found the

work exhilarating. (The partners limit their litigation business because court appearances and filing deadlines mean less control over their schedules.) She was also going through a divorce, making full-time employment a sudden necessity.

In the informal division of labor between the two partners, Ms. Geller is the rainmaker, generating most of the clients, and also deals with payroll and insurance, while Ms. Simon mostly handles and supervises the legal work. At a traditional law firm, this can lead to vastly different expectations of office time. The rainmakers are expected to schmooze with clients on a golf course; the worker bees are supposed to hover over their desks.

A mild version of this injustice lives on at the Geller Law Group. Ms. Geller, who has two boys ages 6 and 4 and a 12-month-old girl, spends Tuesdays and Thursdays with her younger two children, shepherding them to music classes and play dates and squeezing in work while they rest. Many of her tasks, like introductory phone calls and managing the daily inflow of client queries, can be wedged in throughout the day.

She recently took all three children to the doctor. “I had five minutes once Emily calmed down,” Ms. Geller said, thrilled to have a productive window during the chaos of the annual checkup. “I sent six emails.”



Ms. Geller helping her son, Noah, 4, add water to a toy swimming pool at home on a recent Sunday. “I saw no role models who didn’t have a husband as a stay-at-home dad,” Ms. Geller said of the partners at the large firm she left before starting the Geller Law Group in 2011. Credit Lexey Swall for The New York Times

For Ms. Simon, the work unfolds across longer increments — writing legal documents, taking depositions and appearing in court. She expects to work a full day most days, and her weekly hours still hover above 60. But she values the flexibility to duck out — for an afternoon preschool party, for example — and make up the time at night. She takes home roughly half the \$250,000 to \$300,000 she estimates she would earn at a large firm and says the freedom she purchased has come at a relative bargain.

One reason Ms. Simon and Ms. Geller don't feel they have to sneak out of the office is that there are no offices. The firm shuns a permanent home in favor of a shared work space managed by a company called Metro Offices, where it rents a conference room for an hour, an office for a day, as needed. Ms. Geller typically appears there once a week; Ms. Simon two or three times.

They did this partly to encourage their employees to work from home and on their own schedules. "My old firm would drive me bonkers," Ms. Geller said. "If I have a slow week, why can't I take a day, run errands? You'd better believe, when something urgent comes in, I'm going to work an all-nighter." Four of the six employees have young children, and two set aside standing blocks of time to spend with them each week.

The other advantage is to hold down expenses, of course, which allows the Geller Law Group to maintain reasonable profit margins while charging less than competitors with higher overhead. (Ms. Simon and Ms. Geller, who bill themselves out at \$280 an hour, conducted market research. Ms. Simon was determined to stay under \$300 for the same psychological reason that "real estate agents price things at \$999,000.") To keep track of one another, the lawyers and a paralegal meticulously update their shared Google calendars and communicate constantly through Gchat.

Ms. Simon delights in the guerrilla-style logistics of a mostly virtual firm. She says clients generally don't know that the firm doesn't have its own space, though she tells them if they ask. If clients call the firm's main number, they are greeted by an automated switchboard. Ms. Simon's extension and direct dial go to a landline at her home in Washington — a custom-ordered Vonage number with a Virginia area code and the same first digit as the firm's. When she's not at home, those calls are forwarded to her cellphone.

This structure is not for everyone. The firm's lone male associate, Michael Munson, told me he quit in January because he craved the camaraderie of colleagues. But it's a style that's rapidly proliferating, with dozens of similar firms opening around the country over the last decade, according to Joan C. Williams of the [Center for WorkLife](#) Law at University of California Hastings College of the Law.

Most days, the Geller Law Group's arrangements work seamlessly. Some days they do not. Half an hour after the former condo association president left, Ms. Simon was checking email when a Metro Offices receptionist announced that she would have to vacate the conference room for the next booking. Two Metro Offices employees had a spirited debate over which room Ms. Simon had rented for the rest of the day, before directing her to Room 22. But when Ms. Simon trooped down the hall and opened the door, she found it occupied

by her paralegal, Crystal Martinez. She stepped out for lunch and returned 30 minutes later (this time to Room 19) for a meeting with her associate, Sophia Chase, who recently moved from Washington to North Carolina.

After Barack Obama won the presidency, he committed to making his White House family-friendly, to which Rahm Emanuel, then his chief of staff, [aptly retorted](#), “Family-friendly to *your* family.” The Geller Law Group tries to be family-friendly, but not in the White House sense. Ms. Martinez, the paralegal, joined the firm because she wanted to work a reduced schedule after having a child in 2013. Her previous employer, a larger Washington firm, told her that only lawyers could work a reduced schedule, not paralegals.



Ms. Geller watches her napping daughter on a monitor from her home office on a Sunday afternoon. Credit Lexey Swall for The New York Times

Ms. Chase told me that one of the major benefits of working at the Geller Law Group was that she wouldn't have to disrupt her career path when she decided to have a baby. (Ms. Geller later brought up that comment happily. “She's never said that as openly about the pregnancy,” she told me. “At my old place, I never would have said that out loud. I'm glad she said that.”)

Still, there are challenges. Despite the firm's low overhead, losing one lawyer's revenue for several months of maternity leave would be a major strain on its finances, the partners said. During the first three years of its existence, Ms. Simon and Ms. Geller didn't even have a parental leave policy because there were no pregnant women or expectant spouses on their payroll, other than Ms. Geller herself. This month, they finally bought short-term disability insurance that would enable them to offer 60 percent paid leave for eight weeks and an additional four weeks unpaid. Large firms typically offer 14 to 16 weeks at full

salary, according to Deborah Epstein Henry, a legal industry consultant who specializes in workplace issues.

It's one of the conundrums of the work-life conflict: Large firms have the resources to accommodate lawyers' family obligations. They just aren't very hospitable in practice. Nationwide, 98 percent of law firms officially allow their lawyers to work reduced schedules, according to the National Association for Law Placement; only [6 percent](#) of lawyers actually work part time. By contrast, many small firms have the right inclinations but lack the resources to follow through.

At 3 p.m., Ms. Simon and Ms. Geller were scheduled to meet with a client, a team of political consultants who wanted to incorporate as a partnership. To make it back to Washington in time to pick up her son, Ms. Simon had to be on the road no later than 4:40. This would normally have left her plenty of time for the meeting, but the consultants were running late.

Ms. Simon and Ms. Geller acknowledge that outsourcing one's parenting has advantages — like knowing that someone else will tend to the children when work spills past its allotted time. In place of this certainty are dozens of tiny trade-offs: When is a client matter urgent enough to delay parenting, and which clients can be put off or rescheduled as the need arises?

The inescapability of these calculations is perhaps the biggest psychic cost of the flexible schedule, according to others who have experimented with it. Joanne Sternlieb is a former big-firm lawyer who set up her own legal practice in 2002 so she could raise two children and squeeze in swim meets and school plays while working. But she sold her practice 10 years later, after her older daughter hit adolescence.

"When they were younger, I needed to be there physically, to attend events," she said. Later, "it was important for me to not just be there physically but emotionally."

At 4:30, Ms. Simon extricated herself from the political consultants, leaving Ms. Geller to cover. "We told them from the get-go I had to leave by 4:30, and they were half an hour late," she said matter-of-factly. By 5:30, she was caught in punishing rush-hour traffic and second-guessing her navigational judgment. "Maybe I should have taken 14th," she muttered.

It's a contemporary daydream to wonder what the workplace might look like if it were run entirely by women, or at least by fully engaged parents. The answer, it seems, is this: There would be no revolution. Working parents would still be exhausted and distracted and anxious about falling short in every aspect of their lives. Ms. Simon says she sleeps fewer than six hours most nights, and she is frequently awakened after nodding off by the impact of her Kindle on her forehead. But it would help at the margins. And the margins are very likely to be the difference between an impossible combination of professional ambition and parental devotion and a manageable one, if only barely so.

At 5:50 p.m., Ms. Simon finally pulled up to Jack's school, with 10 minutes to spare.

“Mommy, I have an idea,” he said after being strapped into his car seat. “Why don’t we eat noodles and watch superheroes?” Ms. Simon, a sly grin on her face, allowed that it was a good one.