

Mums of STEEL

Lianne Ong takes a ringside seat to the ultimate circus act—juggling motherhood and a career

When Marissa Mayer took on her high profile job as Yahoo!’s CEO while she was pregnant, many women around the world celebrated her as a role model for working mums. But six months later, she managed to anger moms with her return to work just two weeks after delivering her baby, and abolished work-from-home policies for Yahoo! staffers. In her first interview as a mum, she seemed to publicly flaunt a superwoman image: “The baby’s been way easier than everyone made it out to be... So those have been the two really terrific surprises—the kid has been easier and the job has been fun!”

Ouch. Cynics were obviously quick to point out that Mayer had the resources to make things work for her. But for many of us, juggling motherhood and a career poses some really tough challenges. Some of them are truly zero-sum in nature (you cannot be in two places at the same time—certainly not when your five-year-old has hurt himself at school), but working mums have either had to give up something at work or at home, and be disciplined to balance work and family demands.

Regardless of the choices, working mothers seem to be fraught with guilt. When talking about Michelle Obama’s pre-First Lady days, President Barack Obama said, “... when she was with the girls, she’d feel guilty that she wasn’t giving enough time to her work. And when she was at work, she was feeling guilty she

wasn’t giving enough time to the girls.”

But what if your job requires you to work with children?

Does that increase the guilt or make it easier? Consultant paediatrician at NUH’s Children’s Emergency department, Dr Andrea Yeo, says it can be fulfilling to help other children, but she does feel bad about missing out on her own children’s lives. “My children understand this and in their own words they say, ‘Mummy’s going to help other children,’” relates the mother of four boys, aged eight, five, three and one. Within the medical profession, Andrea also found a way to make it work. “I chose to work in children’s emergency paediatrics so I could do shift work and spend more time with my kids in the day,” says Andrea.

As a paediatrician, career and motherhood are symbiotic for Andrea. She says, “I’m calm when my kids are ill. And as a mum, I can empathise with what other parents go through when their kids are ill or hurt.”

Major career changes to suit motherhood are highly risky, but it paid off for Joanna Tan, owner of The Shoe Co., a chain of specialist shoe stores in Singapore and Hong Kong, and mother of three children, aged nine, seven and four. Joanna left a career in litigation at a point when she was feeling unfulfilled. When she was convinced that she would fill a need in the market, she plunged head first into starting her own business. “I became pregnant while I was setting up the business, and I opened my first retail outlet a week before my first child, Aidan,

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arrived. I feel very lucky to be able to have a full working life and be very involved with my kids at the same time. I’m able to do this not just because it’s my own business but also because of the support of my team and my family, which allows me so much flexibility,” says Joanna.

Even though guilty pangs hit many working mums, they are also the first to admit that working keeps them sane, and they therefore come home ready to be a better, more focused mum. “I love my job and it has given me the opportunity to broaden my perspective on what life has to offer. It has taken me places and allowed me to make great friendships along the way. I would love for my kids to grow up with the values that I hold dear, and know that with hard work, they can accomplish anything their hearts desire,” shares Vanessa Lim, Communications GM at a French luxury company in Singapore and a mother of three, aged six, three and five months. She also emphasises it is quality time that matters with the kids, so working parents must make sure every moment they spend with the kids counts.

One thing’s for sure—to be a working mum, support from family and an understanding boss and colleagues are essential ingredients. They make this balancing act work. As Vanessa puts it, if your boss or company does not understand you have family commitments, quit and look elsewhere. After all, you already have the greatest job on earth—being a mum. ■

