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Women on Wall Street in their own words: We asked moms in finance to open up about the pandemic and parenthood — and what the return to office means for their families

Samantha Stokes and Reed Alexander



Insider spoke with several women in high-powered finance jobs about balancing work and motherhood during the pandemic, and the challenges they face as they return to the office. Samantha Lee/Insider

- Women in finance recall long hours juggling their jobs and kids in the early days of the pandemic.
- But they predict a brighter future, including more flexibility to work from home than before.
- Continuing challenges include getting back to the office as the Delta variant creates uncertainty.

Working on Wall Street is tough for everyone. But let's be honest: Moms face special challenges.

They have to balance demanding jobs that often require toiling into the night and on weekends with the well-documented burdens of being working mothers. And while they tend to be fortunate enough to have the financial resources needed to make it work, motherhood is not a job that can be easily outsourced.

The juggling act became that much more difficult during last year's nationwide shutdowns, when many parents were forced to act as teachers and babysitters for their stuck-at-home kids, while also balancing their own Zoom meetings. The merging of home and work life was generally harder on women than men.

According to the [Pew Research Center](#), mothers who worked remotely last year were twice as likely as telecommuting fathers to say they had a lot of childcare responsibilities. Mothers were also more likely

than fathers to say that their parenting responsibilities were interfering with their work, including promotions and the ability to raise their hands for important assignments.

Today, a year and a half since the pandemic hit, the situation appears to be normalizing. Kids are back in school and offices are filling up again — [particularly on Wall Street](#).

In an effort to assess how the transition is going for Wall Street's working mothers, Insider checked in with five women in high-powered finance jobs. We asked them about the switch to working from home during the coronavirus crisis, what they'd learned from that experience, and how they were dealing with the great migration back to the office.

While they seemed to agree they never wanted to relive the frenetic early days of the crisis, many of them also spoke positively about the opportunity to spend so much time with family over the past year and a half. And though they said they enjoyed spending more face-to-face time with colleagues as offices reopened, they also looked forward to more long-term flexibility to work from home.

One of them also spoke about how she benefited from a unique flexible work opportunity years before hybrid work was a thing.

From memories of doing laundry at 2 a.m., being there when a child took "her first steps on a random afternoon," and saying goodbye to the kids for the first time since the pandemic started, here are their stories, edited and condensed for clarity.

Jessica Cullen, Bank of America

As a relationship manager within Bank of America's commercial bank, Cullen is the "quarterback" of the client team, meaning she brings together partners throughout the commercial bank, from credit to core treasury. She is in the Washington, DC, metro area with her husband and two daughters, ages 5 and 2.



Jessica Cullen is a relationship manager within Bank of America's commercial bank. Courtesy of Bank of America

On getting back into a more normal routine:

The biggest challenge is the "unknown" of each new day — if either of my daughters has any symptom even remotely related to COVID, they have to stay home, get tested, and be symptom-free before returning. This continues to be a challenge both for my daughters in terms of their routines as well as the juggling of work schedules for me and my husband.

Even before the pandemic, my work location (home or office) was often dictated by meetings with my clients. At this time, I've returned to a similar model and am now working from home as well as the office.

I was initially overwhelmed by the adjustment of chatting in person with other people beyond my family members. But I do enjoy seeing colleagues and clients in person, as well as being able to physically separate my work environment from home.

There isn't an easy answer, but I would say that if I can get to Friday and look back on the week and feel like I made a difference to at least one of my clients, supported my colleagues, got dinner on the table every night, exercised, and squeezed in time to read a book before bed, that's achieving a sustainable level of balance.

On the early days of the pandemic:

We were able to hire a teacher to come to our home four to five hours a day to watch the kids so we could do some work. It was great because the bank reimbursed us for her time when she was here. And it was good for her because she not only worked as a teacher at our daughter's school, but her second job closed due to the pandemic.

There was a lot of juggling, and we got really good at it. With an 11-month-old, you have to be on the whole time, so my partner and I got good at balancing who was working when and who was caring for kids when. With the teacher at the house, that allowed for some uninterrupted work time.

I would say that on the positive side, my husband and I will never forget it, but we were in the playroom. My daughter took her first steps on a random afternoon. I don't know if I would have seen that pre-COVID. So there were positives despite the challenges.

Lessons she has learned from the pandemic:

In terms of the future, if there's one thing COVID has taught me is that you have to plan things week by week and be open to change. My 5-year-old daughter started kindergarten at the end of August, and my younger child is in day care.

There are certain things that we've changed as a family during COVID that have been good. For example, a few weeks ago, I picked my daughters up from school and came home to make chocolate-chip cookies.

We never would have done that before, never would have had time. But that's one good change. Another change is that we're walking or biking our daughter to and from school this fall since we live too close for the school bus.

Being able to spend time with family and having the reimbursement pay for a teacher at the beginning of COVID made the challenge of the last 18 to 19 months more doable, and we've been able to enjoy the good things that have come out of it.

Surbhi Gupta, Houlihan Lokey

Gupta is a managing director in restructuring at Houlihan Lokey. She has a daughter, age 5, and a son, 2, who was born just a few months before the pandemic began. She is in New York City.



Surbhi Gupta is a managing director in restructuring at Houlihan Lokey. Courtesy of Houlihan Lokey

On helping her daughter adjust to time at home without Gupta:

What's difficult with my little one who just started school is the transition to even teaching your kids that you're not going to be there all the time.

I'm going into the office right now two or three days a week. The days I'm not home when my 5 1/2 old is home — it's mentally confusing for her. She asks: "Why aren't you home when I get home?"

But this was what life was like for her first three years. I never got to do school drop-off and pickup for her before the pandemic.

In those first few months, it was very much surviving by the day and leaning on my husband, who took on a good portion of the work at home, and our nanny. My husband did everything from getting

breakfast ready in the morning to sitting with our daughter for some of her Zoom sessions. I was usually on a conference call or juggling something else at the same time, which meant that I would have been creating noise for her.

I would do laundry at 2 in the morning because when else are you going to do laundry and things like that? We kind of bifurcated roles that way.

Thankfully, I had resources, too, like our nanny. A lot of people didn't have nanny support. If I didn't have that, we might have had my parents come or gone somewhere where we could have family support.

On returning to the office:

As with everything these days in this environment, you have to constantly reevaluate and adjust, but if the Delta variant subsides to a level where we can go back to work with increasing frequency, I'd like to see myself maybe four days in the office, with a fifth as a flex to work from home or come in depending on how busy things are.

The days that I've been in the office in the last two, three, four months — I've really enjoyed the change of pace, getting into the subway for the first time this summer. There's junior staff on my deals whom I've met for the first time in the past three or four months who started this time last year during COVID.

We haven't come out with a return-to-work plan yet for the New York office or the restructuring team, but I think we all know that there has to be some innate flexibility provided.

We know that we've done well in the worst of times, and when work was so astronomically busy. We have to provide some sort of hybrid approach, and I really hope it helps women think about a career in banking, if being in the office was ever a hurdle previously.

Lessons she has learned from the pandemic:

The amount of time I got to spend with my son over the last year and a half I've not spent with my daughter in her first three and a half years. Those are experiences that we'll never forget.

Maybe now, for my daughter's birthday, I can carve out half a day in a way I wasn't able to before. Getting used to picking her up from school and dropping her off — it's gotten me acclimated to a new perspective of what it means to be physically present with them.

The reality is that right now, we have less work in the restructuring world, so it's allowed me to be more present. The key, really, for me is to maintain this balanced perspective as things ramp up and work picks back up.

Ayesha Parra, Goldman Sachs

Parra is a vice president in the asset-management division of Goldman Sachs and a 16-year veteran of the firm. She gave birth to her second child, age 1, in August 2020, months into the coronavirus pandemic. She is also the mother to a 4-year-old and in New York City.



Ayesha Parra is a vice president in the asset-management division at Goldman Sachs. Courtesy of Goldman Sachs

On how working from home let Parra spend more time with her kids:

Being able to drop off my daughter at school — I was able to do that, but much more randomly and sporadically. Now I'm able to because I have a nice home setup.

I always used to joke that you would always see the worst parts of your children because they'd be tired by the time you come home and cranky.

I think there's definitely been a recognition from our firm, my managers, that people can be productive from home. Don't get me wrong — if you were to tell me that I needed to work from home 100% of the time, I'd probably say, "No, thanks." Because for me, it's hard to draw those boundaries.

I would say I go into the office, on average, around three days, with two days at home.

From a mental-health perspective, my own mental health, if you think about just the adult interaction, being in the office — it's important to me because I get a break. At home, it all blurs into one a little bit. And as much as you'd like to be at home with your children and be present, it's also about the quality of the time, not the quantity.

On receiving support from colleagues:

In August, I went on maternity leave, and then I came back to work around January. I would say around the late springtime, I started coming back into the office.

Goldman has an expectant-parent program, specifically a coordinator, a person that I've developed a really strong relationship with.

Another thing that was great for me was being introduced to other folks that were in similar positions. There's a parent mentor-mentee program where you look to others at the firm to build a support system.

Coming back to work post-maternity leave can be unnerving, and to be able to speak to folks beforehand is really helpful as to how they navigate it and the challenges that they've incurred.

Gloria Kim, JPMorgan Chase

Kim is the global head of index research within the corporate- and investment-banking division at JPMorgan Chase, where she has worked for more than 25 years. She leads the firm's development, strategy, and marketing for developed- and emerging-markets fixed-income indexes. Kim works in New York and lives in New Jersey with her husband and 10- and 12-year-old sons.



Gloria Kim is the global head of index research within the corporate- and investment-banking division at JPMorgan Chase. Courtesy of JPMorgan Chase

On how the pandemic made her workdays 'longer':

My old routine was definitely more regimented. I live in New Jersey, so my mornings were spent on the bus — waking up, checking emails, and then going through more emails and talking to London people on

the bus. I'd get the bulk of my work done on my commute before I got in — same with my commute home.

Afterward, it was nice because I could just close shop when I got home and focus on the family.

With the pandemic, the mornings I spent commuting would have to be spent on making breakfast and making sure the kids were ready to get logged on to Zoom. I'd get up a little earlier in the morning, and then it was kind of nonstop work during the day, with maybe a break for lunch.

In the evening, instead of commuting time for emails, it would be a break for dinner and then getting back online to finish out the night.

It was a longer schedule, I'd say, and working remotely extended the day because you were tackling mom and domestic duties before and after work.

On how she's now enjoying 'the best of both worlds' of in-office and at-home work:

I've been back since last September, not every day, but at least three times a week.

It's still early, and there's a lot to adjust to make it work. But when I started coming in more regularly and made that mental switch, I realized: "Wow, I understand why the firm encouraged the earlier start because the time you spend in the office is invaluable."

Teaching and learning moments from impromptu conversations, the energy you feel in the office — these intangibles that you may have forgotten during the duration of being at home, but it really makes all the difference.

There's been a mental ease of being back in the office, and with the remote-work time, I have the best of both worlds.

Before, I would have to stay at work late sometimes because we weren't used to working remotely. I never had an office at home and wasn't comfy logging on. Now, I'm comfy enough to go back knowing that if there's something unfinished, I can take the time for my family and it's easy to hop back into things in the evening.

Maria Hackley, Citigroup

Hackley is the global cohead of industrials within the banking, capital-markets, and advisory division at Citigroup. Hackley, who is in New York City, was previously a managing director at Salomon Brothers, an investment bank that was acquired by Citi in 1998, where she worked for four days a week, with the fifth day off. She believes that a hybrid model will be advantageous for women rising through the ranks on Wall Street.



Maria Hackley is the global cohead of industrials within the banking, capital-markets, and advisory group at Citigroup. Courtesy of Citigroup

On what a 4-day workweek meant to her when her daughters were growing up:

It afforded me the chance to fully dedicate myself to my two children. This flexibility enabled me to increase my interaction with my children, their teacher, and friends.

I enjoyed taking my daughters to their activities on the day I did not work. Special interactions with my girls, including being present at playdates, ballet, and swimming lessons provided me with the joy and satisfaction of having a greater impact on my daughter's day-to-day upbringing.

On the long-term value of a hybrid model for women in financial services:

I do believe that moms could benefit from having three days in the office and two days at home, a hybrid structure that Citi is modeling.

Moms can save time on the commute, which can benefit the employer, as this time saved can be shifted to increased productivity.

The added flexibility allows moms to have dinner with their families and partake in essential aspects of child-rearing and increase their connectivity with their family.

This will be a competitive advantage for firms that provide flexibility to working mothers. It will also prove to be a retention tool to keep working mothers in the workforce.