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TOP Women Lawyers 2024



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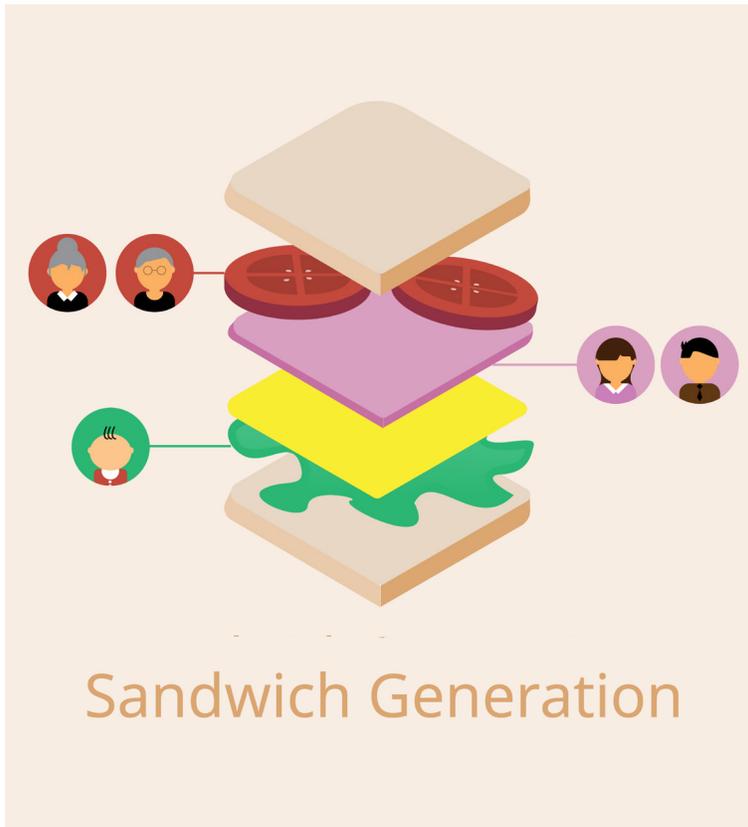
Managing The Double-Decker “Sandwich Generation” In Law And At Home

BY KARIN BOHMHOLDT

If you talk to a woman in her late 30s to early 50s, chances are high she’s navigating a place in her personal life called the “sandwich generation,” a stage when caregiving responsibilities flow to both aging parents and young children, with limited reciprocal care. If you talk to a woman of the same age working in law firm practice, chances are high she’s navigating a space in her professional life between senior and junior lawyers reminiscent of the “sandwich generation” too, a period in one’s professional life where supporting responsibilities flow to both senior lawyers providing less hands on practice and junior lawyers not yet experienced enough to provide full-blown support.

Put those two sandwiches together and you’ve got one monster of a double-decker. Managing both at the same time can be a challenge to personal, professional, health, and financial goals, and in both cases, women are overwhelmingly affected at greater rates than men. It also can be vastly rewarding, so long as one has the right tools to manage it.

Dorothy Miller popularized the phrase “sandwich generation” to refer to an inherent inequality in the exchange of resources and support for those family members caring for two generations simultaneously. Dorothy Miller, “*The Sandwich Generation: adult children of the aging*,” *Journal of Social Work* (1981). Women overwhelmingly are affected by this phenomenon at greater rates than men, with 62% of women providing more than



20 hours per week of unpaid care to family compared to 38% of men. (“The State of Women and Caregiving in 2022,” *caregiving.com*.) All that caregiving takes its toll on the caregiver, with as many as 25% of caregivers finding it more difficult to care for their own health and more than 20% feeling alone in their journey. (“Caregiving in the

U.S. 2020 Executive Summary - AARP Research Report,” at ES-3) And while a woman’s peers at this age can provide an occasional shoulder to lean on, many are sandwiched in their own families too.



Karin Bohmholdt is a shareholder at Greenberg Traurig, LLP, co-chair of its Los Angeles Litigation practice, an adjunct professor at Loyola Law School, a mom, a daughter, a wife, and a friend.

I was thrown into this sandwich just before my 40th birthday when my mom - my remaining parent - suffered a devastating stroke. My six-year-old looked on desperately as I ran out the door away from him to be at my mom’s hospital bed 500 miles away. Three weeks later, my husband and son finally joined me, with my sweet child leaping into my arms and holding on for dear life, demanding and

needing my time, attention, and love. Four months later, we moved mom into our home to continue rehabilitation and two days after that, I slept next to my son's hospital bed while he underwent major surgery of his own. I can't begin to describe the next eight years of juggling and stress, but I can say that my son recovered, mom had her ups and downs, and I eventually settled in as the peanut butter and jelly of my beautiful family.

Through these life events, I kept working hard as a litigation shareholder in an international law firm and came to realize I was sitting in a sandwich there, too. By the time of mom's stroke, I had been a shareholder for about five years, and while our firm and profession had made great strides elevating women, there were few female senior attorneys who shared a similar life experience and could provide guidance. I was striving to build my own practice while simultaneously supporting the practices of senior colleagues I had learned from and those junior to me who needed direction. Like any partner in that phase, on any given day I might be teaching a junior colleague how to write a brief, writing one from scratch myself, and revising one for the more senior shareholder on the case, all while navigating things like business development, high level-strategy, and administrative tasks.

This sandwich generation phase at work is relatable for everyone. Young partners simultaneously support those senior colleagues providing less hands-on support while managing, mentoring, and teaching newer attorneys not yet capable of providing reciprocal support. As a *Wall Street Journal* article put it, "Bureaucratic tasks pile on top of the same billable-hour expectations. New partners face pressure to bring in enough new business to cover their own salary, plus those beneath them." (Sara Ranzazzo, "Being a Law Firm Partner Was Once a Job for life. That Culture is All but Dead." *Wall Street*

Journal (Aug. 9, 2019).) Though common, this professional phase can impact women differently. Research confirms that women frequently take on more "caregiving" tasks at work than men do - often to cultivate goodwill among their teams. Studies also show that women are much more expected to "help" and "care for" their teams than men are, and they are expected to do so with a smile and bright personality. Like at home, lawyers at this career stage spend much of their time supporting others while having more limited care flowing their way. Like at home, peers can provide back-up, but peers also find themselves sandwiched between two generations too.

With the home and professional sandwiches smashing together, it's easy to feel like wherever one looks, someone needs care and assistance. So it's no wonder the 2023 ABA Profile of the Legal Profession and Women found that the number one reason experienced female attorneys leave their law firms is caretaking commitments. That comes on the heels of earlier studies finding that "work over-commitment" and "work-family conflict" had among the highest impact on women contemplating leaving the legal profession because of mental health, stress, or burnout compared to their male counterparts. A Harvard Business School study revealed that 32% of U.S. employees voluntarily left a job because of caregiving responsibilities, the majority of them women, and more than 60% of caregivers have reported impacts on caregiving at work. And, while women have been found to take more steps to prioritize their personal lives with no impact on their *ambitions* at work, they nevertheless retire earlier and lose more wages and benefits compared to men. The end result is that while women still make up more than 50% of associates entering the legal market, just 27% of them become partners. Even fewer are women of color, who face an even greater sta-

tistical challenge accessing paid sources for caregiving help.

So, with more female lawyers staying on to partnership with multi-generational family responsibilities too, what are the answers? I don't have them all, but there are ways to disassemble the sandwiches to make it all work. I've had incredibly proud moments of big and small litigation wins, huge mom wins, and the occasional aha moments. So, to those struggling with the epic double-decker, here are things I've learned that might help:

- **Just do it.** You can't do it all. But sometimes you must, and you will. Then, be proud.

- **Stop comparing yourself to others.** Some readers of this article will say, "boo hoo, you don't have it that bad," and they might be right. But comparing your own story to others' will never help you feel better or succeed more and you'll just wind up distracted by anger or guilt. Whatever is the worst thing you've ever been through is still the worst thing you've ever been through. Whatever is the biggest workload you've ever shouldered is still the biggest workload you've ever shouldered. Focus on you.

- **The bread still supports.** Despite the sandwich theory of non-reciprocal care, if you look at it another way, your generational support is still there. We can call upon our professional mentors when we need them, and we can learn a ton from junior lawyers. A hug from mom is still as uplifting now even though she can't quite fully hug the same way, and my kid is still the best part of my day.

- **You are never totally alone.** My husband is incredible. Truly. I'm lucky that way, but whatever source of support you have, don't be afraid to lean on them when you can. At some point, I stopped leaning on some of my confidants because I began to feel like an annoyance, but there are other sources of help. It may

take some research, but someone is always available to help. LA County caregiving resources: <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/healthybrainla/Caregiving/caregivingresources.htm>. LACBA Lawyer Well-Being Project: <https://lacba.org/?pg=Lawyer-Well-Being-Project>. State Bar Resources: <https://www.calbar.ca.gov/Attorneys/Compliance-Records/Lawyer-Assistance-Program/LAP-Support-Services-for-Attorneys/LAP-Resources-for-Attorneys>.

- **Prioritize what helps your mental and physical health, but not to the exclusion of everything else.** A great mentor told me, "health and family first, but that doesn't mean the job is last." I'd love to do nothing but travel, watch TV, exercise, and grow and eat fresh vegetables every day, but I live on planet Earth and have a career I want to keep. I walk with my kid every day and I sleep 8 hours a night because I've learned that doing so is imperative to my thriving at work and home. That comes with a trade-off: I work many nights and weekends to make sure my clients and teams get the very best of me too.

- **Squeeze the minutes.** At first I thought multi-tasking was the ultimate answer, but then I backed my car into another car driving to visit mom in the ICU while on a conference call and realized maybe the true multi-tasking wasn't always the best idea. (Not to worry...I left a note without skipping a beat on the call and the owner of the other car was mercifully unconcerned.) So instead, I think about it as squeezing out minutes. Five minutes micro-waving a frozen lunch is an eternity - you can zone out waiting for it (and if that's how you prioritize health, great!), or you can use that eternity to clear emails, check in with a colleague or client, do some stretches, or make a doctor's appointment.

- **Prioritize your best working**

times. I love working late on Friday nights. The emails stop. The office is quiet. I get some of my best work done in those moments, so Fridays are often uneventful at home. Maybe your best time is 6 am on Monday. Whatever it is, make it happen. The best stress reliever is getting something done that has to be done.

- **Beware advice.** The internet is flooded with advice like mine, and not all of it is good or applicable to you. Please don't quit. Please don't do bare minimum Monday. Please gather advice and then apply it in a way that works for you to be successful and fulfilled in life and work.
- **Enjoy the ride.** I love being a

lawyer. I love being a mom. I love being a daughter. Don't let the moments where you draft a great legal document go by without pride. Don't let a rare smile of recognition from mom pass you by. Whatever it is about the law that you love, swim in it. Whatever it is you love about your family, engage in it.

In many ways the sandwich generation of women in law are pioneers. Our predecessor female law partner pioneers didn't all have families as often as we now do, and families often were younger then, too. We are learning together, but what I can tell you is that we can do it. It takes a little planning, a little faith, and a little hope.