



Non-Entry-Level Women Working in Housing: Challenges and Supports for Motherhood

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WORKING IN RESIDENTIAL LIFE WHILE RAISING CHILDREN can create role conflict for women as they attempt to balance two highly demanding responsibilities. This qualitative study explored how mothers working in residence life described the important challenges, supports, and potential gains associated with their roles. These women struggle to achieve a balance between work and personal lives, facing the possibility of burnout and the expectation that they should be available at all times. Using semi-structured interviews with 10 women currently raising children while working in residence life, we identified several themes related to role conflict and the institutional factors and people who can serve as valuable supports: supervisors, colleagues, friend and family, and partners and spouses. In order to strengthen the support offered to working mothers, residence life departments can promote flexible policies and procedures and guarantee that supervisors are transparent about the workload expected of their employees.

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Women working in residential life who are simultaneously raising children combine two highly demanding and intensive roles. Few studies have focused on the unique challenges this set of student affairs practitioners face and what is needed to keep them in the field. The available research is broader in scope and looks at student affairs practitioners who are also mothers (Burmicky et al., 2022) and must balance the responsibilities of that role with those of working in residence life (McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2022). Residential life and housing is a 24-hour operation, and staff are expected to be available at all times to respond to emergencies. Women who are actively parenting while in this functional role are under high demands from both work and home, contributing to stress and the possibility of burnout (Marshall et al., 2016). The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of residential life professionals who are also raising children. The findings can then be used to inform workplace practices and to continue exploring ways to retain these important personnel.

THE CHALLENGES OF STUDENT AFFAIRS WORK

The Struggle for a Work/Life Balance

According to the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR), women make up 51% of higher education administrators (Fuesting, 2023) and 71% of student affairs professionals (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). Many of these women are working mothers, who may find that their jobs in student affairs are difficult because of the pervasive expectations to work long hours, nights, and

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weekends (Marshall et al., 2016). Because many of these professionals live where they work and/or are on call for nights and weekends, this can be especially challenging.

There is very little literature on the experiences of mothers working in student affairs in general and even less about those working in residence life (Burmicky et al., 2022), and few have included children as a variable (Marshall, 2009). Given that much of the literature on mothers working in student affairs is outdated and that more recent work is largely contained in dissertations (McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2022), it becomes even more important to continue the research in this area, especially because the literature that has addressed this population “paints a largely negative picture” (Marshall, 2009, p. 193).

Full-time student affairs professionals who are mothers are an understudied group (Burmicky et al., 2022), and the profession of student affairs is particularly challenging for women raising children (Blackhurst et al., 1998; Marshall, 2009; Marshall & Jones, 1990). Many of these women have had to change their career goals and delay advancement in order to care for children (Nobbe & Manning, 1997). As McKinnon-Crowley and colleagues (2022) observed,

The normative expectation of being a good mother conflicts with the demands of being a working professional, especially in student affairs. The student affairs profession, a field statistically dominated by women, is time intensive and often requires commitments outside of the traditional 8-to-5, 40-hour work week. Competing work and family pressures exist and are influenced by institutional policies and norms. (p. 66)

In a study of women who are higher education administrators, participants cited a long list of sacrifices needed to ascend the career ladder but also expressed deep satisfaction with their professional position and role, and the sacrifices needed are significant; participants reported that they needed to prioritize their children, career, and spouse—and to do so in that order—and they also cited extremely limited time, if any, to pursue any personal interests outside of these three priorities (Marshall, 2009). Many student affairs professionals who were mothers and worked as directors felt they had to slow down the trajectory of their career path due to the conflicting demands of motherhood and their professional work (Nobbe & Manning, 1997).

Not all women raising children are willing to make these sacrifices. Some are unable to meet both their personal and professional needs or to find a balance between the two, leading to their attrition in student affairs (Marshall et al., 2016). A significant number of women who cited this as a reason for leaving felt they needed greater flexibility and fewer after-hours commitments to more effectively juggle their childrearing responsibilities. Some even expressed a desire to remain in the field if they could make the balance work (Marshall et al., 2016).

The Possibility of Burnout

Raising children while working full time in a demanding environment can lead to the kind of stress that contributes to burnout, which is characterized by physical and emotional exhaustion, lack of motivation, and disengagement and is a significant contributor to leaving the field (Marshall et al., 2016). In their study of mothers working in student affairs, McKinnon-Crowley and colleagues (2022) found that the non-traditional hours, overall stressful situations, and high work expectations are important factors in burnout.

Participants consistently talked about the culture of burn-out that they experienced from work expectations imposed by the field of student affairs and by their daily work environments. More specifically, participants shared their struggles about the expectation to always go above and beyond. (p. 75)

Many professionals in housing and residence life, particularly newer professionals, live where they work alongside the students they work with and serve. Live-in professionals must separate their work self and their private self, but this boundary is difficult to maintain (Hirschy & Staten, 2021) since the live-in position requires working 50–60 hours a week, including nights and weekends. This constant on-duty scheduling limits their ability to participate in relaxing non-work activities. Mothers serving in these positions are constantly seeking a balance between work and family obligations, and the inability to do so can have serious consequences: “The culture of [residence life] work pushes [live-in] employees to integrate their work and personal lives in ways that are not always healthy or fulfilling and that frequently lead to burnout” (Rankin & Gulley, 2018, p. 64).

In addition to their work, employees who do not live-in are often required or at least expected to attend events after hours, continue to serve frequently on a duty rotation, and generally be available during the many after-hours events that demand attention. In these ways, work life presses on their home lives.

The Challenge of Ideal Worker Norms

Ideal worker norms can have a significant negative impact on all employees and are particularly damaging for those balancing work and children. Williams (1989) defined the ideal worker as follows:

One who can work a minimum of 40 hours a week and has no career interruptions (such as time out for childbirth, infant care, or care for the sick)—and can do the things required for “normal” career advancement—which frequently includes the ability to work overtime and the willingness to travel. (p. 833)

Scholars have observed that the image of the ideal worker appears to be rooted in traditional gender roles (Acker 1992; Sallee, 2021; Williams, 1989) and depicts women as playing a supportive role to men, while the typical male is “an unencumbered worker who is totally dedicated to work and who has no responsibility for family care, and thus is most likely to be a man whose work is his life and whose wife takes care of every-

thing else” (Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2021, p. 1422). Women in the workplace are expected to conform to high expectations in order to excel, and many student affairs professionals are socialized into the ideal worker norm from the very beginning of their careers (Isdell & Wolf-Wendel, 2021). As Blanchard and Andrews (2015) observed, “Unfortunately, new professionals often internalize the message that they must work long hours in order to appear confident and fit within the office culture” (p. 206).

In order to examine the challenge and supports facing women who must balance their work and family lives, we explored the factors that enable them to remain in the housing field while parenting young children, the supportive measures they need, and the challenges they face in creating and maintaining a work/life balance.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Data Collection

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, we posted a call for participants in the S.A.M.S (Student Affairs MomS) Facebook group, a private group with 8,300 members. Requirements were that participants must be mothers, employed in housing for at least seven years, 26 to 65 years old, and raising one or more child. Participants selected or were assigned pseudonyms for themselves and their institutions. We interviewed 10 participants. The number of years that they had worked in residential life ranged from 9 to 21, and the number of their children ranged from 1 to 4. (See Table 1, page 17)

Researchers collected data using semi-structured interviews conducted over Zoom. Participants had the option to turn off their cameras during the interview. The interviews were transcribed by Zoom, and the transcript was reviewed and corrected as needed by the interviewer. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes.

Analysis

We analyzed the interview transcripts using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis approach. Each of the researchers independently read the transcripts and generated initial codes using an inductive thematic approach. After initial coding, the researchers met to compare and discuss coding decisions, examined discrepancies, and reached consensus on coding and code definitions. We identified themes by sorting and grouping codes and discussing patterns. We refined the themes through discussion, resulting in final themes identified through consensus, ensuring consistency and rigor in the analysis.

Raising children while working full time in a demanding environment can lead to the kind of stress that contributes to burnout, which is characterized by physical and emotional exhaustion, lack of motivation, and disengagement and is a significant contributor to leaving the field.

TABLE 1**Description of Participants**

Name	Institution	Institution type	Capacity	#Children	Ages	Title	Years in RL
Bethany	Smart University	Public, mid-size, regional serving	3,000	2	8, 10	Assistant Director	16
Alania	River University	4-year residential	2,000	4	16, 11, 6, 11 mo.	Director of Residential Life	9
Anne	Lake State University	4-year, public, liberal arts	2,400	2	2.5, 14 mo.	Associate Director for Housing Operations	11
Betty	Lake Ontario College	Large, public, state	5,000	2	9, 6	Assistant Director	13
Elizabeth	City University	Private	2,900	2	5, 7	Associate Director	14
Hazel	Pleasantville University	Small, private, liberal arts	800	1	8	Assistant Dean of Student Life	14
Katelyn	Margaritaville University	Mid-size, public	6,500	3	12, 10, 15 mo.	Assistant Director for Housing Operations	9
Maggie	Sunflower University	Private, Catholic, 4-year, research	5,600	3	20, 18, 14	AVP for Student Development and Exec. Dir. of HRL	21
May	Rainville College	Mid-size, urban, public	1,143	1	5.5	Associate Director	16
Renee	Smile State University	Large, public	5,500	3	3, 7, 9	Director of Residential Education	13

In addition to their work, employees who do not live-in are often required or at least expected to attend events after hours, continue to serve frequently on a duty rotation, and generally be available during the many after-hours events that demand attention. In these ways, work life presses on their home lives.

Researcher Positionality

The first author (Deb) is a White cisgender woman with a young adult daughter still living at home. She is a full-time faculty member and department chair of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Binghamton University. She works closely with the Department of Residential Life on large projects and writes frequently about the residential experience. The second author (Amy) is a White cisgender woman with elementary school age twin daughters. She is the senior associate director in residential life at Binghamton University. She has worked full-time in residential life since 2008, starting as a residence hall director and working in various capacities within a residence life department. The third author (Meegan) is a White cisgender woman with a daughter starting her first year in college and high school age twin daughters. She is the senior associate director for residential life at the University at Buffalo. She has over 25 years of experience in residential life and housing serving in different roles.

LIMITATIONS

One limitation to the study is sampling. We chose to recruit participants using the S.A.M.S Facebook group specifically for mothers working in student affairs. It is a relatively large group with more than 8,000 members. However, choosing to recruit only through this group limited our participant pool to those who belonged to the group. We also focused on mothers who remained in the field and not those who left due to the difficulties of balancing their roles as professionals and mothers. This choice was made in response to the limited number of studies that have been conducted about working mothers in housing and residence life.

FINDINGS

Three main themes identified from our interviews with mothers who work in residence life are organized according to how they connect with the following research questions: *What are the factors that allow women to remain in the housing field while parenting young children? What are the supportive measures that assist in this retention of mothers in the housing field? What challenges do working mothers in housing face to effectively balance both roles?*

The themes that emerged from this analysis were connected to people (people make a difference in the experience of mothers in the workplace), role conflict (work responsibilities and home responsibilities, specifically mothering, can be in tension), and institutional factors (structures in place—institutional mission and policies, availability of local childcare options, and departmental procedures—can serve as important supports).

People Make a Difference

People can make a positive or negative difference for women in housing who are raising children: sometimes providing needed support and other times undermining their ability to balance work and housing careers. Within this theme we include supervisors, spouses/partners, extended family, and colleagues.

Supervisors. Participants spoke most frequently about the role of their supervisors in helping them maintain a critical work/life balance and focused on the value of their support. As May explained,

She (my supervisor) encourages me to take time, she understands when I am starting to get to a point where I am really feeling overly guilty, or feeling really stressed, and is supportive of me as a professional and as a person.

Others, like Hazel, spoke of supervisors who were not supportive or helpful. “I think some of those other challenges are supervisors that are not flexible or don't understand, or don't have a child. My child has special needs, and so there's additional things that come with that.”

Spouses/partners. Participants also frequently referenced spouses and partners as being integral sources of support that contributed to their success in balancing their competing roles. Renee acknowledged this in her comments.

That's one support I have. The most amazing partner. . . . We are both 100% active partners and parents in our relationship . . . I don't think I can discount how amazing my partner is in keeping me at work, because he knows it's my passion.

Extended family. Participants also referred to support received from parents and in-laws:

My parents also followed us. From Texas to here . . . so they followed us, and so they got here just before baby 3. And have been able to help out more and more with 3, and now as 4 has come along, but . . . like I mentioned, those camp Grandma, Grandpa days.

Colleagues. Finally, support from colleagues was also mentioned by several participants, including Bethany:

I've always had really supportive people on any team that I've worked on at work. That makes parenting a little bit easier. Just hearing about or sharing stories and laughs and things with people who genuinely want to know your kids and cheer them on.

Role Conflict Defines the Job

Women working in residence life often face a heavy workload, including after-hours responsibilities for programming and being on-call. The consensus amongst our mothers working in residence life is that the dual demand of being a parent while serving in a role that requires so many different responsibilities is a significant challenge. Anne explained this as a serious interruption of her life as a parent:

Challenging when you have kids here. I'll still get calls at 8 and 9 o'clock at night. I'm trying to put a kid to bed, and now my cell phone's ringing, and I'm answering questions

about "work." The separation is really difficult, because I want to be good at my job, but I also want to be fully present for my children, which is . . . sometimes hard, because . . . It's that balance of how do I . . . do a good job with that, too.

The mothers described how work responsibilities and home responsibilities, specifically mothering, can be in tension because the extra work requires long and irregular hours, crisis response, and evening or weekend commitments. These expectations for constant availability often clash with family routines, childcare schedules, and time needed for parenting responsibilities. Both roles demand high emotional capacity and a sense of care for others. Constantly supporting students' well-being while also nurturing their own children can undermine their emotional well-being as they experience feelings of guilt, burnout, isolation, or loneliness. Elizabeth lamented being pulled in the direction of work when what she really wanted was to spend quality time with her family.

No more capacity or energy to be loving when I get home, because . . . it's gone. It got all used up, and . . . I think that's sometimes what I struggle with, is I feel like my kids get . . . the worst of me, right? . . . I have . . . two hours with you, and all I have left in my tank.

As Renee acknowledged, there's just as much reason to show up for your kids as there is to show up for work: "You can be A-plus all day, but how do I also bring that A-game when I'm home with my kids and my family and my partner, and show up through them, and not just show up for this work." Mothers described struggling to separate their family life from their work life and recognized that establishing boundaries while balancing the demands of a live-in or active engagement position required them to negotiate these competing priorities. For May, this was essentially a struggle between her mind and her heart.

I think the times that I am expected to work evening and weekend hours has been challenging because again, I want to spend that time with my family, and so I'm not always as emotionally present. On either end of the spectrum, personally or professionally, sometimes my mind and my heart are kind of in two different areas.

Despite these challenges, many participants, like Bethany, were also determined to perform their jobs at a high level.

I want to be the best employee ever. And I also want to give the students the best experience by doing my job really well, but then also, at the end of the day being their mom and a wife to my husband is my number one priority, and where I can't be replaced.

Institutional Factors Can Serve as Needed Supports

There are many structures in place that can help to support these women: institutional mission and policies, local childcare options, and procedures and facilities in place to support them at the departmental level.

Institutional mission. Some of our participants referred directly to the institutional mission as making a difference in validating and supporting their roles as mothers. As Alania explained,

The day I was called and offered my on-campus interview, I found out I was pregnant with baby number three. And so I was like I don't want to waste y'all's time. I was like, you don't want me. . . . And the response from both the hiring supervisor and the VP—it's a Catholic institution was: "What better way for our students to see you living out your vocation as a wife and a mother?" They were like, we'll figure it out. If you want to be here, we want you.

Local childcare options. For mothers with infants and pre-school children, finding suitable childcare arrangements was essential in being able to make their professional and personal lives work. Achieving this balance was particularly difficult for those who had relocated to a new city for their position or lived in a location where childcare options were not plentiful. Betty, for example, commented on the additional difficulty of finding care for an infant:

Some of that transition, when I had my daughter, the on-campus childcare was very much a preschool and did not have infant spots, so finding infant care, I think, is a nationwide problem for many families. To find that affordably and with spots that you don't have to think about a year and a half before you even get pregnant.

Participants like Anne also referred to the high cost of childcare, particularly in relation to their salaries. "Being in an area with affordable childcare. That would have helped . . . because I'm in an area that it's just . . . my entire paycheck is childcare . . . And that's not even an exaggeration." Additionally, as Katelyn explained, the academic calendar can prove challenging to finding adequate childcare coverage:

My husband works in academics at the K-12 level. Um, and so certainly, like, the beginning of the school year is a challenge. Camps are done for summer, and . . . teachers and administrators are back at school, and, you know, we're doing RA training.

Departmental procedures and policies. For those of our participants who were in positions that required them to be on-call/on-duty, this was the most difficult part of working in housing while parenting. Maggie described it as a major disruption:

The duty aspect, just being on for a week at a time, and then the middle of the night phone calls. Those are disruptive to my partner. And disruptive to the kids if I were to wake up, and have to do something.

Women in the workplace are expected to conform to high expectations in order to excel, and many student affairs professionals are socialized into the ideal worker norm from the very beginning of their careers.

These expectations for constant availability often clash with family routines, childcare schedules, and time needed for parenting responsibilities. Both roles demand high emotional capacity and a sense of care for others.

DISCUSSION

Many of the supports that mothers working in residence life need are the same ones that most mothers who work outside the home need: supportive people, affordable quality childcare, and a balance between their work and personal lives. Many of the challenges, however, are unique for those in residence life: being on-call/on-duty and living where you work. In particular, mothers who live-in or live-on have a different experience than residence life professionals who do not. The conflict about their dual roles is real and is exacerbated by departmental expectations for around-the-clock work. Ideal worker norms also play a part in amplifying the tension; many participants apparently bought into the idea, as Renee suggested when she defined her primary goal as being “A-plus all day.”

Institutional factors also matter. Some institutions promote policies and practices that provide flexibility and make facilities such as lactation spaces and on-campus childcare centers (particularly those that offer infant care) available to those who need them; these options make the lives of mothers working in housing much easier and indicate that the institution cares.

Finally, supervisors make a difference. Participants appreciated those who provided understanding and flexibility and trusted them to carry out their professional responsibilities—and having one who was a parent themselves made them even more appreciative. Unfortunately, not all supervisors are so supportive. As Alania observed, “I’ve had all four quadrants [of supervisors], like, non-parent bad, non-parent good, parent bad, parent good.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

To have a more complete picture of the challenges facing mothers working in residence life, a future study could explore the experiences of those who have left their positions in housing, which can provide important information about the supports these mothers need to succeed. In addition, the differences in experiences between those mothers who lived in/on and those who did not indicate a need to look more closely at each as a distinct group in terms of balancing the demands of working in residence life and parenting. Based on our findings, small things like washers and dryers in the apartment and nearby parking can make a big difference for mothers who live-in or live-on. Institutional policies could also be modified, if necessary, so that the size of their family is taken into account when apartments are assigned; for example, one participant who was married and had a baby was assigned to an apartment for two and was told that her husband would not be able to live there with her and the baby. Small accommodations such as these for live-in staff can make a major difference in the overall quality of staff experiences and can contribute to their retention.

The on-call responsibilities for residential life mothers can create significant after-hours conflict with parenting and family. The level of disruption and the required level of response can vary from simply answering a phone call to needing to respond to the local hospital. We recommend, when interviewing prospective employees, that residence life departments be transparent about the level and frequency of response required to serve on-duty.

Flexibility in the workplace can also help working mothers balance their work and personal lives. We heard from a number of mothers who lack the close proximity of family members who can serve as back-ups for childcare. If working moms are expected to balance their work and parenting responsibilities, they must be given the flexibility to take time off for a sick child or to manage childcare gaps during the school year.

CONCLUSION

Mothers who work in residential life face many of the same challenges all working mothers face, but they also face some that are unique to their situations. By beginning to understand their challenges, the residence life and housing field can better support these mothers in their professional roles. Further research and deeper understanding may lead to better conditions for employees as they navigate this phase of life. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do the structural expectations of residence life work shape who is able to enter, remain, or advance in the field, particularly for those with caregiving responsibilities?
2. In what ways does the “ideal worker” norm show up in housing and residence life, and how might it create barriers for working parents?
3. The article highlights supervisors as both supports and barriers. What does effective supervisory support look like in practice within this context?
4. How might institutional policies (i.e., flexibility, childcare support, workload expectations) be reimagined to better support retention in the field?
5. Given the tensions described between professional and personal roles, what would it look like for housing and residence life to create conditions where staff can truly thrive not just survive?

Discussion questions were developed by Crystal Lay, California State University Monterey Bay.